Bruce Sterling: Spires on the Skyline

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARCH

$2.75 US • CANADA $3.50

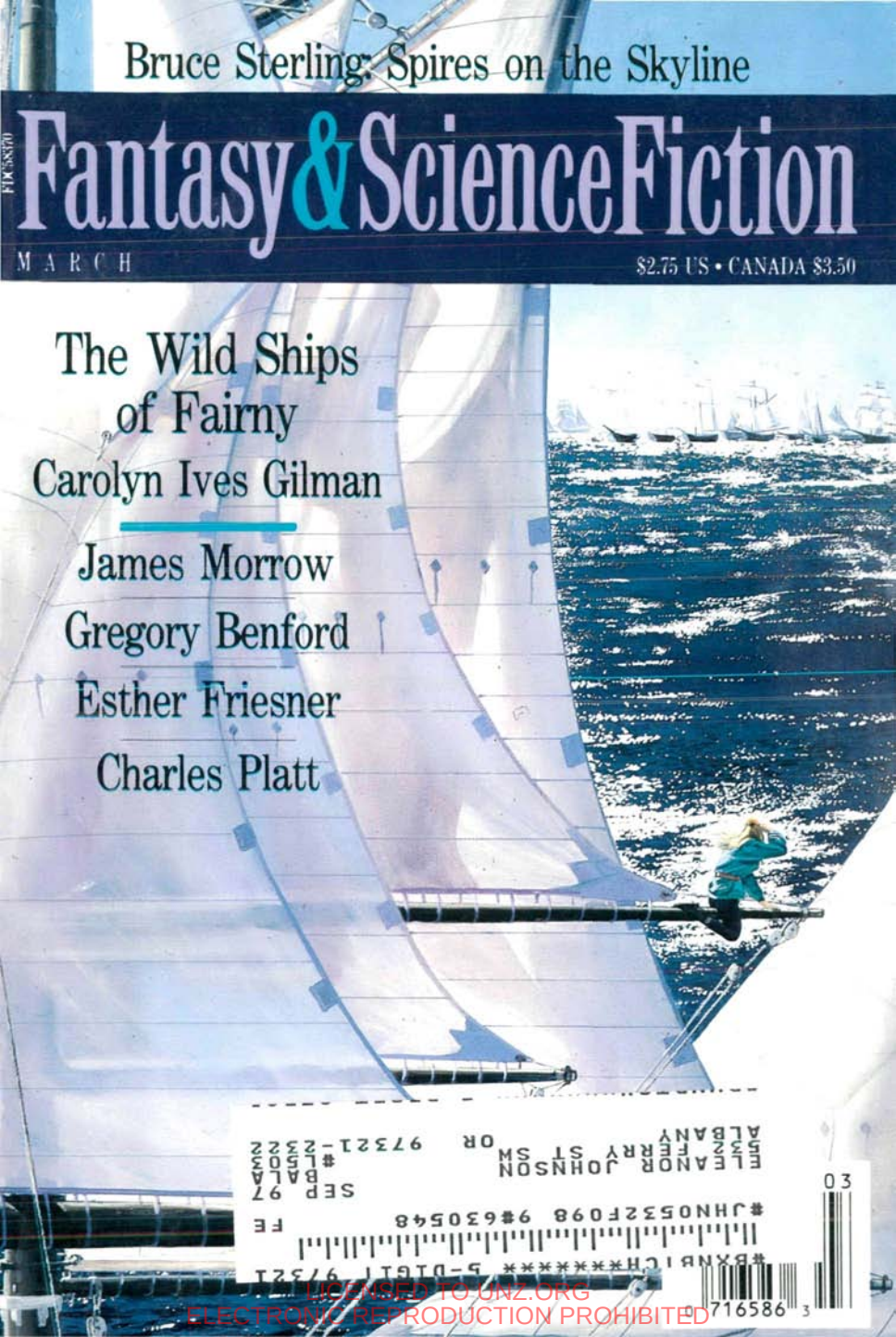
The Wild Ships of Fairny
Carolyn Ives Gilman

James Morrow

Gregory Benford

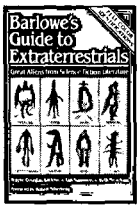
Esther Friesner

Charles Platt



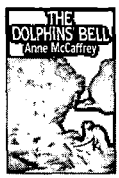
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BEAM... TELEPORT...



6916 $12.98x

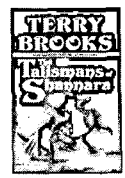
6478 $22.50/$7.98



8995 $6.98x

8268 $8.98

6585 $20.00/$8.98



8656 $22.00/$10.98

4994 $7.98x

2113* $27.95/$14.98

91180 $19.95/$9.98

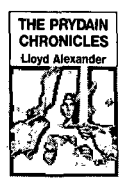
6536+ $22.00/$10.98

5819+ $9.98x

8342* $25.00/$11.98

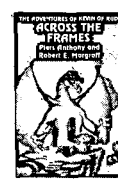
7260 *Woundhealer's Story, Sightblinder's Story, Stonecutter's Story* $45.85#/$12.98

5017 *Farslayer's Story, Coinspinner's Story, Mindsword's Story* $50.85#/$13.98



5595 *All 5 novels plus The Foundling & Other Stories* $83.70#/$14.98

4747 *So You Want to Be a Wizard, Deep Wizardry, High Wizardry* $45.85#/$12.98



5652 *Dragon's Gold, Serpent's Silver, Chimaera's Copper* $14.98x

5660 *Orc's Opal, Mouvar's Magic* $37.90#/$12.98

HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN...

A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION. Once your membership's accepted, we'll send your 5 books. If you're dissatisfied with the books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing.

HUGE DISCOUNTS ON HARDCOVER BOOKS. Save as much as 65% off publishers' edition prices. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE. You'll receive up to 16 issues a year. Each reviews the Featured Book Selection(s) plus dozens of alternate books.

SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE. To get the Featured Book Selection(s), *do nothing*—it will be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—simply return your Member Reply Form by the specified date. A shipping and handling charge (and sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order.

AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION. Take up to 2 years to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices. Afterwards, you may resign membership anytime.

RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES. If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine was delayed and you had less than 10 days to respond, simply return the book *at our expense*.

x Hardcover edition exclusively for Club members
Combined publishers' editions

Prices in fine print are publishers' hardcover editions.
Prices in bold print are Club hardcover editions.

* Explicit scenes and/or language

+ Copyright © 1993 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved. STAR TREK is a Registered Trademark of Paramount Pictures.

◊ Copyright © 1992 by DC Comics, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Published by arrangement with Warner Books, Inc./New York. Cover photo courtesy of Warner Bros.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

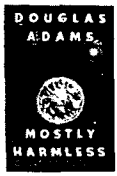
EVEN MAIL THE COUPON

6213 $18.95/$10.98

3319 $20.00/$8.98

6445 $10.98x

7575 $7.98x



7302 $20.00/$7.98

2261 $19.95/$9.98

7609* *The Book of the Damned, The Book of the Beast*
$39.90/$10.98

5264 *The Book of the Dead, The Book of Mad*
$39.90/$10.98

8607 $23.50/$11.98

8292 $21.95/$10.98

2345 $22.00/$10.98

2337 $22.00/$6.98

IT'S THE ONLY WAY ON EARTH TO GET 5 FOR $1 with membership

THE Science Fiction BOOK CLUB®

MAIL TO: *The Science Fiction Book Club*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6367
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6367

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *The Science Fiction Book Club* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 5 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just $1, plus shipping and handling.

SAVE MORE—BUY YOUR FIRST BOOK NOW FOR $2.98
☐ Send me the book I've indicated and reduce my commitment to only 3 more books. Bill me an additional $2.98, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)
48224 33

48225 31

Mr./Mrs.
Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

If you're under 18, your parent must sign here: _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

MFS 3/94

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

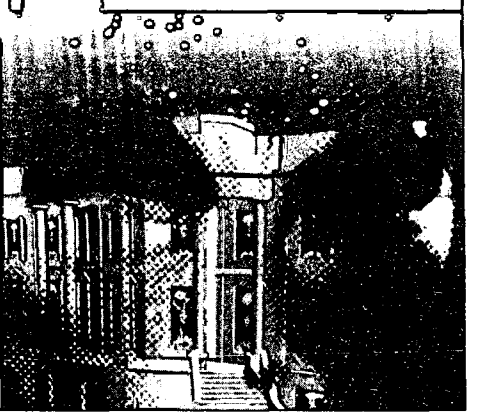
a novel by Patricia Anthony

Brother Termite

"A novel as powerful and moving as her brilliant debut, *Cold Allies*... *Brother Termite* is not just a work of grand literary chutzpah; it's a genuinely great novel." —Faren Miller, *Locus*

"Brilliantly effective."
— Fred Cleaver, *The Denver Post*

"A dark...imaginative, sensitively written novel...[Ms. Anthony] writes precise prose that is suffused with poetry."
— Newgate Callendar, *The New York Times Book Review*



HARCOURT BRACE
Available at bookstores everywhere

✿✿✿✿✿✿✿

❄ New F&SF T-Shirts ❄

We have a limited quantity of brand-new, 100% cotton T-Shirts. They are white, with a full color reproduction of the October/November 1993 cover by Tom Canty. Only available in large, X-large and XX-large. $12.00 each, plus $1.50 postage and handling. Mail your payment to:

Fantasy & SF, 143 Cream Hill, West Cornwall, CT 06796

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
MARCH • 45th Year of Publication

NOVELET

THE WILD SHIPS OF FAIRNY 131 Carolyn Ives Gilman

SHORT STORIES

A MARATHON RUNNER IN THE HUMAN RACE 9 Dave Smeds

DOING ALIEN 26 Gregory Benford

SECOND CONTACT 40 Gary Couzens

DIRECTOR'S CUT 65 James Morrow

TWO LOVERS, TWO GODS, AND A FABLE 72 Esther M. Friesner

SOUS LA MER 82 Carrie Richerson

THE CONVERTIBLE COVEN 96 Susan Wade

BRIXTOW WHITE LADY 114 Felicity Savage

DEPARTMENTS

INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION: TRADING DATA WITH DEAD AND DIGITAL 33 Charles Platt

SCIENCE: SPIRES ON THE SKYLINE 54 Bruce Sterling

FILMS: TOO MANY GHOSTS 91 Kathi Maio

CARTOONS: ARTHUR MASEAR (25) FRANK HAUSER (39) HENRY MARTIN (81).
COVER BY BRYN BARNARD FOR "THE WILD SHIPS OF FAIRNY"

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH, Editor
CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher
BOB HOWE, ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editors — HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 86, No. 3, Whole No. 514, March 1994. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.75 per copy. Annual subscription $26.00; $31.00 outside of the U.S. [Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.] Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1994 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 11526, EUGENE, OR 97440

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE CHANGES continue.

Sometimes I feel my job as editor is to oversee the changes as they take place. Those of you who peruse the table of contents before reading the editorial will have already noticed two unusual things in the Departments.

First of all, after a fairly long hiatus, Charles Platt returns with his *Inside Science Fiction* column. Charles has done a lot of non-fiction writing on science fiction, including articles for *Omni*, *Wired*, and *Science Fiction Eye*. He is also a well known sf writer in his own right. His most recent novel is *The Silicon Man*, which just appeared in hardcover from Tafford Publishing.

Charles will be using the column to discuss trends and changes within the world of science fiction, and will do so quarterly. We are pleased to have him back on board.

Secondly, we do not have a books column this issue. Orson Scott Card has found that his own writing career has taken off in such a way as to take most of his time, and he is unable to do the reading required to sustain a regular column. Since I have been a fan of Scott's work for at least fifteen years, I must confess I would rather have more Orson Scott Card fiction than a year's worth of book reviews. He regrets leaving; he has enjoyed his tenure with the magazine — and he promises us some short stories in the future.

Novelist Charles de Lint, whose short stories in these pages have received two World Fantasy Award nominations, will take over the *Books To Look For* column. His first column will appear in the April issue, and I will write more about his background then.

This, of course, leaves us a month without book reviews, which gives me the opportunity to expiate some editorial guilt. Most book companies send review copies to the reviewers directly, but some send the copies to me. I usually pass along the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

books my columnists have not received — usually. Every now and then a book crosses my desk that I cannot bear to part with. I keep those books, promising to review them myself when the moment allows. This week I read several of those books, and found only two worth mentioning.

At Vikingcon in Bellingham, Washington, last August, I met Sean Stewart, who gave me a copy of his novel *Passion Play*. He also, kindly, sent another copy to pass along to my reviewers, but that copy got caught in the switch-over. The novel was first published by Beach Holme Publishers in Stewart's native Canada, where it received a great deal of attention. Now Ace Books has reprinted *Passion Play* here in the United States.

I read *Passion Play*'s first page, and found I couldn't put the book down. Set in a near-future world where the cities are a center for severe urban decay, where religion — specifically Christian fundamentalism — is the norm, *Passion Play* is the story of Diane Fletcher, a shaper who can read emotions. Fletcher is a hunter, a freelance psychic who works with the police in solving crimes. The book opens as she catches killer Rutger White, who led a group of men to kill an adulterous woman with bricks. White is a "Red" — a Redemptionist — who believes his crime "correct in the eyes of God."

White is not the focus of the book, but his views are. And Fletcher must examine those views continually as she moves to another case — the death of the great Red actor, Jonathan Mask, who is electrocuted in his costume while preparing to perform in *Faustus*.

The heart of this book is its uncompromising examination of morality against a backdrop of religion. The theme intertwines between the idea of crucifixion (The Passion, in Christian terms), the Passion Plays of old, the play at the center of the novel — and passion itself, or lack of it. Stewart examines religiosity versus faith, vigilantism vs. traditional methods of punishing criminals, and the dangers of mixing religion with politics. Overlaying all of this is a fast-paced murder mystery, and an interesting near-future world.

The novel does have flaws: the writing has a number of infelicities of style, from repeated phrases to unclear communication. And the world, while well imagined, is not described. Stewart often changes setting — moving from church to apartment to theater — without describing any of the places. For much of the novel, it seems as if Diane

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fletcher's gift for seeing emotion has left her with a limited ability to see the physical things around her — a point which the author has obviously never intended.

Still, *Passion Play* is a marvelous debut from a writer to watch.

Another convention-related book that I received last spring is Joe Haldeman's *Vietnam and Other Alien Worlds*. Published in an edition of 1000 copies by NESFA Press, the book appeared in time for Joe's Guest of Honor appearance at Boskone in February of 1993.

Vietnam and Other Alien Worlds is a compilation of short stories, essays and poetry. The short stories, which lead the volume, come from the Confederacion universe in which *All My Sins Remembered* is also set. These stories were previously published, mostly in *Analog*, and manage to combine a hard-edged future world with a gritty sort of sense of wonder.

The poetry continues that feeling, picking up and expanding on other themes in the collection. The book ends with one of the most powerful poems written in the last decade, the award-winning "DX."

While I enjoyed the stories and poems tremendously, the gems in this book are the essays. Four of the essays have never seen print before, and three feel a bit dated (the two written about the space program, and one on the Robert Mapplethorpe art show), yet all contain marvelous insights into art, science and the space program. The two best essays revolve around Joe's Vietnam experience. The title essay, "Vietnam and Other Alien Worlds" discusses the science fictional aspects of modern warfare along with a young man's perception of an alien world. "War Stories" is a counterpoint: his reviews of books on Vietnam. Both essays examine experience as the foundation for fiction, and together more than make up for the cost of the book.

The book can be ordered from NESFA Press (PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203), although I doubt that there will be many copies left by the time this editorial sees print. That's a shame, actually. The work collected in this volume needs a wider audience.

The regular books columns will return next month. In the meantime, please turn to Charles Platt's column, and welcome an old friend back into the pages of the magazine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dave Smeds is the author of two fantasy novels: The Sorcery Within *and its sequel,* The Schemes of Dragons. *His short fiction has appeared in anthologies such as* In the Field of Fire, Sword and Sorceress, *and* Future Earths: Under African Skies, *as well as in magazines from* Pulphouse *to* Ghosttide.

"A Marathon Runner in the Human Race" is a science fiction story set in the milieu of Dave's new novel, Ambassadors. *Two other stories set in that world have already been published: "Reef Apes" in* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and "Suicidal Tendencies" in* Full Spectrum 4.

A Marathon Runner in the Human Race

By Dave Smeds

AUTUMN LEAVES FLOATED onto the patio. Neil Corbin counted them: three from the maple, six from the ornamental plum. Another shifting of the seasons — what did he care?

He keened his ears for the familiar chorus of shuffling shoes or the clicking of Joe and Al's daily game of dominoes. But not a person stirred, and none were visible save crazy Anne over in the shade of the umbrella table. Were it not for the birdsong in the trees, Neil would have sworn his deafness had never been cured.

A car turned into the driveway — another source of silence but for the low moan of tires on concrete. The vehicle stopped mere yards from Neil's chair. A muscular, casually dressed young man emerged.

"Sorry I'm late, Gramps. Are you ready?"

Neil accepted his grandson's help in rising. "You're looking good," the old man said.

"You will, too, Gramps. Come on. The clinic's expecting you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Neil removed his elbow from the young man's grip. "I only move at one speed, Matthew. You know that." He padded toward the car, wobbling but making steady progress.

Matthew rolled his eyes, piled the luggage in the trunk, and went to the driver's side.

"You forgot the trophy," Neil said.

The item lay beside the chair where Neil had been sitting. Grumbling, Matthew retrieved it, placing it in his grandfather's lap rather than waste time reopening the trunk.

Neil's hands closed over the statuette above the bronze plate that bore his name. His hands automatically stroked the contours of the running figure, but his attention wandered elsewhere, soaking in one last view of the place that had been his home for so long. His glance tracked to the empty, dusty windows of the far wing. His room had been the third from the end, just over the sign reading "Shadyhome Retirement Community."

The once-immaculate grounds bore the first small signs of neglect. The grape vine he had planted when he came to live there hung lush with fruit in the arbor by the fish pond, its trunk almost as fat as a tree. He'd never seen so many grapes on it, ripe and ready. His fellow residents always ate them too quickly.

"You must be almost the last guy to move out," Matthew commented. "I think you'd have stayed there if the place weren't shutting down."

"Could be," Neil said. He sighed. "Let's go."

Traffic seemed to part magically in front of them, quiet except for the wind of passage and an occasional cranked up music system. Matthew, as if sensing Neil's lack of interest in conversation, kept himself busy manually guiding the car, though the navigation menu prompted him as to what speed to travel, and when to change lanes, in order to maintain the symphony of cross-town transit.

Matthew really *was* looking good. He held the steering wheel with a teenage grace and ease. Neil lifted his own palm, stared at the creases, and after a slight pause, pulled down the visor to look in its tiny mirror.

Moles and liver spots disfigured his bald head. The translucent pallor of his complexion was relieved only by the rosette stain of burst capillaries. Wrinkles — no, crevasses — lined a face rendered gnomelike by passing decades.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He lifted up the visor, and turned back to the scenery. He blinked in surprise. They were arriving at their destination. Miles had vanished, lost to the mirror.

"Dr. Rosen said to have him paged from the lobby," Matthew reminded him — Neil hated it when young folks imagined he had no memory capacity. "Do you want me to go in with you?"

"No. I can manage on my own."

Matthew chuckled. "I'll pick you up here tomorrow at 10:00 sharp."

"You'll be late," Neil said. He hobbled into the clinic as resolutely as his one-hundred-twenty-year-old legs could carry him.

In the morning Matthew was on time, of course, tardiness cured by the deliberate skepticism. The young man was leaning against the car as Neil stepped out the door ahead of Dr. Rosen and strode briskly down the walkway.

Matthew's eyes telescoped outward like a cartoon character. "Gramps?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Neil answered, voice firm and deep. "You tell me."

Matthew grinned and opened the car door. "Looks like they got every molecule in the right place." He slapped his grandfather on the back, a firm tap that, only a day earlier, would have caused a stagger. "Come on. You'll want to get home and see your new room."

"I can't wait," Neil said, deadpan.

Neil slid gracefully into his seat, and had his door closed before Matthew could assist. Through the open window poured the aromas of heavy dew and mulch from the flower beds along the walkway. He sucked in a deep breath. When had his nose ever been able to detect scents so well?

Matthew stepped away to speak to Dr. Rosen. They kept their voices so low that Neil knew they were talking about him. Irritated, Neil deliberately turned away.

A woman was sitting on a bench about twenty yards in front of the car. The morning sun haloed her reddish curls, giving her oval, smooth features an angelic peace, like a Renaissance madonna, but with northern European coloring.

Neil made eye contact. She blushed, and turned her gaze to the avenue, as if expecting someone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Slowly, belatedly, Neil thought to smile, but it was too late. Matthew climbed in and the vehicle pulled away.

"You really *were* a runner," Matthew said, gesturing at Neil's body. His jovial tone seemed forced. No doubt his mind was still on whatever Dr. Rosen had told him.

The sawdust scent of the track welled up in Neil's mind. Hurdles skimmed his calves. Competitors hovered in the corner of his eyes, not quite keeping pace with his long, sure leaps and strides. The ribbon parted as his chest struck it.

"I broke a track and field record or two." Neil waved his hand dismissively. "Just school records, you know. I had one good season in sprints and hurdles."

"I thought your event was the marathon."

"That came later."

Neil was jiggling his right leg, and tightening his fists just to gauge their strength. Matthew kept looking at him with a cat-with-a-canary grin.

"What's so funny?" Neil demanded.

"Those hormones are pumping now, Gramps. You're feeling what I felt, two months ago."

Neil pursed his lips. "Maybe," he said, temporarily closing the subject.

Boxes of Neil's possessions, full of a century's worth of packrat accumulations, lay stacked willy-nilly all over the guest bedroom of Matthew's apartment. Neil clicked his tongue, estimated the capacity of the empty shelves, and tried to imagine his collection of photographs and prints against the robin's egg blue of the walls. He'd forgotten the magnitude of moving into a new place.

Neil began by shifting aside boxes in order to unroll his treasured Afghan carpet. As he did, his hand skimmed the edge of a flap, slicing his skin open.

Wincing, Neil rushed to the bathroom to wash and bandage the paper-cut. With his injured hand over the sink and the other on the faucet handle, he paused. The ribbon of blood along his wrist and forearm reversed its flow, defying gravity to return to the vessels from which it had sprung. That done, the slice closed, weaving together with an itchiness that made Neil feel as if ants were suturing him up with minuscule needles and thread.

Not ants. They were called nanodocs. Within three minutes they had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

completed their job. Neil ran his finger along unblemished, unscarred flesh. He shuddered. Next thing he knew, the Feynman Institute would come up with a means to revive the dead.

Perhaps they had. Lifting his glance to the mirror, he stared at a man from a previous century. The athletic lines of his reflection matched those in the track team photo from his senior year of college. The thick, brown hair was the same glorious mop his June Cleaver mother hounded him to cut, all the while editorializing about the corrupting influence of Those Beatles Fellows.

The last time he'd looked like this, he'd been twenty-three years old.

Even his perspiration evoked an earlier time, when exertion brought out a crisp, pheromonal incense, not the reek of ancient glands. Neil tensed his neck. The muscles bulged, taut and corded — no more sagging jowls. He tugged off his shirt, and tapped his firm, lightly rippled abdomen.

This was how he'd been before he'd developed that annoying tire around his waist. Before he'd become a father. Before all those years at a desk job. Neil Corbin — lean, mean track star.

Except he was even better this time around. As requested, the nose he'd had surgically straightened at age thirty-nine was still straight; the appendectomy scar, from age seventeen, was gone as if it had never existed. The promise of nanotechnology had blossomed. A year ago, nano-assemblers, despite all their useful applications, could only augment other types of medical care. Now they coursed, self-guided, through every cell of Neil's body, reining in free radicals, disassembling invasive microbes, healing damage as it occurred.

And, of course, restoring youth. Permanently.

Neil turned this way and that in the mirror, unable to resist the visual feast, the sensual kiss of fabric against hard muscle and supple skin. Was this him?

An unfamiliar sensation started low in his torso, grew stronger, and finally demanded attention. He opened his fly and there it was, a physiological event as effortless as breathing or blinking. His groin hummed like a violin string drawn tight over the bridge, its music amplified by the sweet ache from his bladder.

"Incredible," Neil murmured.

He hadn't had erections for thirty years, yet this was already the fourth in half a day. He made no attempt to produce them; they just happened, as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they had every day of his adolescence.

This wasn't like the inoculation with the Ponce de Leon Vaccine, which had halted his aging sixteen years ago, but kept him looking and feeling no better off than a healthy one-hundred-four-year-old. The mass media hoopla of the last six months came back to him like some sort of electronic echo, but the dreamlike impossibility of the reports was gone. He'd followed the lead already taken by three-quarters of the world's population. He was young again.

Then why did it still feel as if his soul hung poised over the abyss of death? He turned away from the mirror, no longer able to look.

His body seemed oblivious to any anxiety his mind could muster. He could have used his penis as a towel rack.

He shook his head slowly. "What," he asked his erection, "am I supposed to do with you?"

MILD INDIAN summer radiance stretched down the canyons of downtown buildings as Neil and Matthew joined the flow of pedestrians. Young face after young face ambled by, nearly all on attractive, physically fit bodies. A few children played, a few middle-aged types promenaded, trying to look distinguished; otherwise, everyone seemed to be in their late teens to early thirties.

A month after his visit to the clinic, Neil had almost grown used to the absence of sagging flesh and rheumy eyes around him, despite all the decades spent in retirement communities, hospitals, and other abodes of the elderly. It reminded him of college — another equally unreal part of his adult life.

"Do I really have to do this?" Neil asked.

"Humor me," Matthew said meaningfully. "You have to get out and about sooner or later."

"I've been busy. Architecture's changed a bit since I last generated a set of blueprints." Back then, such things were still duplicated on paper and were still sometimes blue.

"Gramps..."

Neil sighed. He'd never shared a home with Matthew before these past few weeks. He'd been surprised to learn that his grandson could be just as stubborn as he.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This time, Neil had conceded defeat, if only because the kid was right. Neil *had* been a hermit, and despite his excuses, all too little of his time had been spent at his interface studying to resume his career. For the most part he simply sat in his room.

Matthew at least had the good grace not to lecture. Dr. Rosen had already done enough of that. All that talk about how the very old — and Neil was about as old as anyone on the planet — didn't always adapt to the installation of nanodocs. They exhibited "a reluctance to engage in life," as if those who had fought the war against age were now suffering a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Some had gone as far as suicide.

That was their prerogative, Neil thought. Who said that a person had to act young just because he looked it? Who said a person had to embrace immortality?

"You'll enjoy it out here," Matthew said.

"You keep telling me that."

"Trust me. This part of town did wonders for me just after I had my nanodocs installed."

They turned a corner, arriving at their destination.

"My god," Neil whispered.

The area was nothing like he remembered. The dingy gray concrete, blacked-out windows, and peeling paint had become a panoply of clean, bright façades with an abundance of glass, proudly displaying the interiors. Gone were the hawkers and the girls lounging like slung beef on the curbsides, replaced by stylish registration desks, openly displayed lists of services, and comfortable parlors for interviews between clients and artists.

The paint on the remodelled apartment house across the street rolled its molecules, shifting from an off-white to a deep beige that reflected the sun less harshly. The last time Neil had seen that building, its bottom floor had been festooned with handbills warning of AIDS. Those posters would be collector's items now that nanodocs rendered any and all venereal diseases a part of the past, along with unintentional pregnancy.

The crowds of prospective clientele, still mostly male, wandered past the establishments like children at an amusement park. Joy soaked the air, a carefree piquancy that slid in with each inhalation, caressing taste buds on its way past the tongue like a fine, dry wine. Neil followed his grandson's lead like a marionette, with his jaw slack and eyes numbed by some new sight

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

almost every instant. Matthew plunged ahead, clearly gripped by an aphrodisiacal contact high.

Two female artists chatted on the steps of a coffeehouse, taking a break during the lull between the morning rush of patrons and the traditional evening barrage. One of the women noticed Matthew's attentiveness and turned slightly, providing both men with a view of a cleavage in which a banker could lose small change forever, if banks still used coins.

"Let's go in here," Matthew suggested.

Neil resisted the tug on his sleeve. "No. I'd like to look around a bit more."

Matthew raised an eyebrow and tilted his head toward the buxom artist. "You sure about that, Gramps?"

"Yes. Maybe I'll drop in later. If not, meet you at seven by the fountain."

Matthew shrugged. "Okay. See you then."

Neil wandered. In its new incarnation, the redlight district stretched far past its old confines. One place of business after another washed past him. None held his interest more than a few seconds. He thought he understood why Matthew had chosen to bring him here. Sex certainly was the epitome of "engaging in life." And he could well believe all the therapeutic effect Matthew had personally derived from visits here. Matthew was seventy-two, and thanks to the vaccine had stopped aging at fifty-four. He'd never been old enough for sex to lose its allure.

Neil drifted by a palatial bordello with a statue of Lily St. Cyr out front, continuing on even though the receptionist, in her elegant woman's tuxedo, flashed him a wonderful smile. He ignored a tidy hotel with its rooms where, so the marquee claimed, the virtual whores were Custom Programmed by Maestro Roberto Niezca Himself. He even skipped the old-fashioned video arcades, something familiar from episodes of youthful curiosity or loneliness.

Finally he came to a three-story Victorian. "Gallery of Erotica" it read in Romanesque letters above the door. Few people seemed to be entering, and in their expressions passion rode serenely, absent the frantic urgency of most passersby.

Neil pressed the handpad, letting the gallery debit his account. The sibilant noises of the street vanished as the door swung shut behind him.

He meandered down an aisle filled with sculptures of bacchanalian orgies. In an alcove, a female mannequin wore lingerie that mutated at nano-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

levels through the fashions of many eras, from Colonial-era teddies to the brass inauguration bra made famous by Erotic Artists Guild president Elaine Agoura. Finally he came to a small section devoted to framed centerfolds from mid-20th century cheesecake magazines.

His glance lit on one he thought he recognized. He and Toby Wyckoff had found a cast-off *Playboy* once in a dumpster. The model had the same intensely black hair as that issue's Playmate. Her breasts, naturally shapely — as opposed to the silicone balloons featured in later decades — pointed outward at an angle designed to knock teenage boys' eyeballs out of their sockets. A bedsheet denied the viewer a glimpse of her pubic hair — a forbidden zone for the camera in that day and age.

Neil wiped his palms on his shirt. How easily the memory bubbled up. Had he truly been that adolescent, crouched breathless in an alley behind a dumpster, acknowledging for the first time the undeniable tropism of sexuality?

Yes. He had.

An hour later, emerging from the gallery, he drank in the ambience of the street with senses newly tuned. The redolent musk of sweat and arousal that wafted from open upper-story windows made him heady. A thousand nights' worth of gasps, sighs, and moans seemed to pour out of the walls of every building on the street.

Maybe Matthew had been right to bring him here. It had awakened something. Perhaps it wasn't so unreasonable to explore the feeling.

But not in this rain of fire. Despite all the changes, one thing about this part of town was the same: here, sex was a commodity. It was for jaded palates, looking for something new, something quick, something uncomplicated.

Neil's palate was not jaded. He'd been out of the game so long he was like a virgin. He couldn't start with a business transaction. He'd have to do things his way.

He headed for the fountain to wait for his grandson, treading like a snow leopard across the Himalayas, knowing a mate must be somewhere up there among the alpenglow and mist.

The party scene was the same backwater it had always been, with the same fish caught in its eddies, lacking the vitality to dare the rapids to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spawning pools. Neil endured it until, at a housewarming for a neighbor of Matthew's, he met Thea.

Thea was long and statuesque, with a deep ebony complexion that may or may not have been her birth color — did it matter these days? She came up to him as he sat, alone, on the patio retaining wall.

"Hello, you must be Neil," she said.

Avoiding eye contact, he gestured indoors at the petite blonde Thea had arrived with. "Your spouse seems to be the hit of the night in there."

"Oh, she's not my spouse. Just my roommate."

His cheeks reddened. "Whoops," he said. She laughed in a way that told him both that she'd taken no offense, and that she thought it hilarious that anyone would characterize her as homosexual.

"What do you...um, do?" Neil asked.

"I'm in household AI sales. Tell me, sir, do you want your door guard program to growl at Jehovah's Witnesses or to politely tell them to fuck off and leave you alone?"

Neil snorted into his beer.

Thea kept talking. She was easy to listen to. The stiffness leaked from his shoulders and spine. He stopped compulsively running his hands up and down the handle of his mug. Thea filled the dreaded long pauses when he couldn't think of a thing to say. Yet she listened when he did manage to stutter out a phrase. She laughed at his jokes.

Gradually the conversation became real, more than small talk. Neil managed to get past his tendency at earlier parties to keep it light. Dr. Rosen said that trait was a defense mechanism, a habit left over from his twilight decades when any friend he made died. Old widowers risked much to try to forge deep relationships. Neil didn't care about the analysis. He just did what felt right. Heart pounding, he got the words out: "Can I see you again?"

Thea played with one of her tightly kinked curls, like a cat next to a mouse it has trapped, letting the poor thing wonder if it will again set down its paw. "Yes. I would like that," she said.

For their first date, they took the Slingshot up to low earth orbit, on a ten-hour tourist package Thea had signed up for on a whim years back. She'd never canceled the reservations for two, figuring that when the time finally arrived, she'd find someone who wanted to accompany her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Neil and Thea spent the bulk of the visit strolling along the view decks of the Earthrise Mall, goggling at the starscape. Their favorite moments, though, took place in what Thea labeled "the trampoline chamber," a sphere eighteen meters in diameter, attached to the space station just so Grounders could fly back and forth to their hearts' content. They giggled like children, hysterical at the peculiar effect of weightlessness on their faces and figures. By the time they took their berths in the descent vehicle, they were so pleasantly exhausted that they napped for the last half of the glide to sea level.

As they strolled out of the station into a blustery night, Thea threw back her head and hooted enthusiastically, "Oh, I *love* doing new things, don't you?"

Her arm drifted into the crook of his elbow. Neil's wits seemed to vanish into the breeze, knocked out of his brain by the unexpected chill of natural planetary atmosphere. He recognized the cue. The decision, said her body with a theatrical shiver, was his.

She looked so perfect, black flesh framed against a black sky. The warmth of her radiated all the way from his cradled elbow up his arm and down his torso to his crotch. Yes, he told himself, trying to reestablish his ability to breathe. If she was ready, so was he.

SHE TOOK Neil into her with velvet-glove softness. She squirmed on top of him, rolling like an otter on the slick, firm surface of his torso. Her breasts tickled the hairs of his chest, pasting them down with her own sweat. Casting off his anxiety, he concentrated on pleasing her.

She was riding him again, much, much later, when his climax arrived. The ejaculation seemed to originate from the tips of his toes and the surface of his scalp, rushing to his penis and into her with flash-flood suddenness and force. As his hips collapsed to the mattress, he thought he would faint.

"Well!" she said, arching back and purring, still straddled across him. "What'll we do tomorrow?"

He opened his eyes, peering under heavy lids at her beaming, gratified smile. His body still basked in post-orgasmic tremors, but his mind was working again. He replayed her comment from earlier in the evening. *"I love doing new things, don't you!"*

The night lost the transcendence that came from banishing thirty-five

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

years of abstinence. In its place rose the shame of having read the signs wrong. Neil choked down his disappointment. He began to count the days until Thea would no longer consider him to be "the new thing."

Felice pranced across the tennis court, playing aggressively, forcing Neil to call upon old tricks to hold his own. Though small and fine-boned, she whacked the ball over the net with blistering vigor. The sweat flew from Neil's hair as he lunged to catch her serve. The upper quarter of his racquet got there just in time, sending the ball arcing lazily to her side.

She caught it before the bounce, slamming it into a far corner of his court, far out of his reach.

"C'mon, Neil," she yelled. "You can move those hunky thighs faster than *that*."

He stuck out his tongue, and on her next serve, fed her the ball straight back to her face — another old trick. Startled, her backhand counterstroke fell apart.

"Barbarian!" she called cheerfully.

Neil grinned, enjoying the steady pounding of his heart, the burn in his legs. But she'd gotten him with the comment about sluggishness. He was trying hard, but whenever he flung himself full-tilt across the court, he recalled the time, at age 74, when a knee had locked up without warning, sending him to the asphalt so hard he broke his nose. He'd given up tennis at that point.

His body was good now. He should trust it.

He hated seeming less than ideal in front of Felice. She seemed like just the person to ease the bruises left by his three-week liaison with Thea. The winter had been long and lonely.

In other areas of his life, he was adjusting. He'd resumed his architectural career. He'd moved out of Matthew's apartment into a place of his own. Dr. Rosen seemed satisfied with his progress. Yet this new world remained flat without a companion to share it with.

Felice was a miniature tornado. She played with a determination that intimidated blossoms right off the nearby trees. She was easy to admire, and it was likewise easy for him to imagine building on that respect until it included an erotic element.

He was thinking of that, not his stumbling, as their court time expired.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They collected their balls and ambled away, surrendering their spots to another couple.

"Good game," he said. He'd been ahead, but she'd been coming up on him rapidly; if they'd had time to play out the match, she'd probably have won. He told her so.

"I did okay," she said, shrugging in such a genuinely modest way that he couldn't help but feel even better about her. The woman had no pretensions; he didn't have to strut for her. He didn't have to invent compliments.

"Want to shower together?" Neil asked.

Felice raised her eyebrows. He supposed she was wondering why go to the trouble — their nanodocs could scrub out their pores, dissolve the grit, and freshen them up. But showering together had a definite romance to it, like roasting marshmallows over a campfire under the starlight. He knew he wasn't the only traditionalist left, or the locker rooms wouldn't still be there, over at the edge of the courts by the redwood grove.

"Sure," she replied, as if catching his mood. "Why not?"

The spray did wonderful things to Felice's body. The rivulets born on her upper chest and shoulders twisted and forked as they negotiated her curves. The fine, almost transparent hairs at the base of her neck caught droplets like dew on strands of spider web in a morning garden. Her nipples rose. She arched her breasts toward him, as if to say, "Here, these need the touch of warm, soapy hands."

He hesitated. The way her wet hair clung to her skull, and the color of it, reminded him of his own daughter — may she rest in peace — as a toddler.

"How old are you, Felice?" he murmured.

Old enough, her wink told him, but she answered, again without guile, "Thirty."

He'd been a widower longer than she'd been alive. Christ, she might not even have reset her age yet; he might be seeing her natural youth. He stepped behind her, and used his warm, soapy hands — on her back. He didn't want to let his body language commit him to a course he didn't intend.

She leaned into him, rubbing her slick form against his. The spray couldn't wash away her fresh, feminine aroma. His penis stirred against the curve of her buttocks.

He shifted his hips away abruptly, as he would have done had a child, wriggling in his lap, prompted an inadvertent sexual response.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He needed time. An evening of candlelight and good food would reshape his mood, make him forget the ninety year difference in their ages. Even a few minutes might be enough, but not *now*, with the water rinsing away the delicacy of his fantasies.

He didn't have time. The stiffening of her shoulders told him she'd taken offense.

Ah, thought Neil, he'd buried himself now. She'd made an offer, and he had slapped it down. She wouldn't leave herself open for rejection a second time. If he wanted anything to happen later, he'd have to pursue her with diligence. She'd make him ask, in words, and would give him no encouragement until her ego had recovered.

But he didn't want to pursue her with that kind of fervor until he was more sure of his feelings for her. Yet to delay would surely cause yet another insult. He didn't have to be a genius to know that all too soon, Felice would be looking for a new tennis partner.

Slowly, like a senior citizen, Neil rinsed the soap from his hands.

Daffodils bloomed along the walkways of the cemetery. The heat of late spring had already shriveled natural daffs, but here the yellow King Alfreds and orange-and-tan Saharan Lords stood tall and proud, maintained by their own versions of nanodocs, programmed by the groundskeeper.

Neil followed a route his feet had traveled many times before, until the headstones took on dates-of-birth that sent a burble of acid up his esophagus. 1950. 1955. 1960. 1965. The last generation to die of old age. He could find the names of kindergarten classmates on those marble and granite markers. By the law of averages, his mortal remains should be here, too. But that burst appendix hadn't claimed him, the lymphoma had been treatable, that drunk driver had swerved at the last moment. Here he was.

An ancient oak tree shaded the particular resting site that he had come to see. Weather had muted the sharpness of the carved letters. He scanned across the name to the impossible date-of-death. How had thirty-two years passed with so little in them?

Kneeling, he placed a lavender rose upon the grass, over the spot he imagined his good wife's heart to be.

"You spoiled me, Stacey," he said to the earth. "You set my damn standards too high."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Was that it? Was he carrying a torch? Was her ghost jealously guarding him, perhaps? Convenient, to think it was only that.

The rose caught a sunbeam that slipped through the oak leaves. The petals drooped in the increasing heat. The flower had not been programmed to last.

That was the way it had to be.

A family appeared through the cemetery gates, making a procession toward a large crypt near the fountain. Every adult of the group walked on long, supple legs, their unlined faces tilted away from the day's brilliance.

Two lanky men, so similar in appearance they could've been twins, brought up the rear. From their body language, Neil doubted they were twins. More likely the one on the left was the great-grandfather of the one on the right.

Neil worked his way back through the graves. At the entrance, a woman stepped onto the lawn with a small bouquet in her hands. As the distance between them closed, he automatically made eye contact.

Her fine reddish curls and her figure brought a concealed smile of appreciation to his face, but when he saw recognition spark in her green eyes, he stopped short. So did she.

"I know you, don't I?" she said.

"Yes," he replied. "I saw you at the clinic, the morning after my nanodocs were implanted."

"My morning-after, too." She looked at her bouquet, and then at a set of headstones, as if measuring the distance between the two. But she didn't walk on. Instead, she smiled.

"My name's Neil."

"Nadine."

Neil and Nadine—it had a nice, alliterative ring. Suddenly his scheduled plans for the rest of the morning dissipated.

"Are you a local girl?" he asked, waving at the cemetery. "Family here?"

"Just my husband. He died not long after we retired out here in '41. I didn't see much point in moving him or me back to Texas. So ah jus' stuck him in th' ground with his boots pointed up." A chuckle accompanied her last sentence, adding to the color of the deliberately exaggerated twang. Neil recognized that kind of mirth; it was the type people used to bandage a deep wound.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know," Neil said, half to himself, "when I saw you on that bench outside the clinic, I just naturally assumed you were twenty-two. Old habits, I guess."

Abruptly she raised the bouquet to her nose, covering a bashful smile. She glanced again toward the headstones. "Would you excuse me for a moment...Neil?"

"Of course."

She nodded, grateful for his instant understanding, and traced her way across the cemetery. Neil found a shady spot beneath an oak much like the one growing near Stacey Corbin's resting spot. He sat on a retaining wall, watching the patterns of the clouds in the sky. Nadine joined him there, sans bouquet.

A babble of thoughts seemed to dance across her brow. Neil tentatively broke the silence by asking her occupation.

"I was in furniture sales," she answered. "But there's not much need to sell things like new sofas when a homeowner can just command the old one to change its color, or create a spare from garden dirt. So I've shifted into interior design. You'd be amazed how picky everyone's become about their decor, now that they can afford any style they want, and can change it every day."

"No, I wouldn't be amazed," he said, and told her of some of the home redesign requests that had flooded his office.

Before Neil knew it, an hour had passed, and his mouth had become cottony from all the conversation. Suddenly Nadine glanced at her watch. "Oh, my lord! I have to go!" She winced, as if wishing she'd forgotten to put the timepiece on that morning.

"Can I take you out to dinner some time?" he asked. The question tumbled out without having to think about it.

The green of her eyes deepened, or was that just the widening of her pupils? "Yes."

"How about tomorrow night?"

She pursed her lips. "How about Tuesday instead?"

She laughed at his tiny frown of disappointment. "You northern boys are so impatient." She lifted her hand up. Recognizing the gesture, he kissed her knuckles.

A trace of a shiver rolled along her arm.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We have plenty of time," Nadine said. She gave him her Link access number and turned to go.

Yes, Neil thought, watching the wiggle of her hips as she disappeared down the street. Time. Deep inside himself, he turned from the trophies and record books and team photos on his shelf, and looked toward the open track ahead. His feet were in the starting block.

What did one hundred twenty years of the past matter, compared to a thousand years of the future? Heading home, Neil repeated Nadine's number under his breath until it became part of him.

"Jacoby is new in the business."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

F&SF *science columnist Gregory Benford appears this issue with some science fiction. Greg has written over two dozen novels, among them* Timescape *(which won the Nebula) and* Beyond the Fall of Night, *written with Arthur C. Clarke.*

Greg sent us "Doing Alien" as a not-so-serious companion piece to his recent column on the possibility of intelligent life in outer space.

Doing Alien

By Gregory Benford

I REMEMBER HOW MITCHELL was putting the moves on some major league pussy when the news about the aliens came in.

That Mitchell, he stopped in mid-line and cocked his big square head and said kind of whispery, "Double dog damn." Then he went back to the little redhead he had settled onto the stool next to his, way down at the end of the mahogany bar at Nan's.

But I could tell he was distracted. He's the kind of fella always drawn to a touch of weirdness. At Mardi Gras he just loved the confusion, not being able to tell guys from gals, or who was what, the whole thing.

He left with the redhead before ten, which was pretty quick even for Mitchell. When he's headed for the sheets there isn't much can get in Mitchell's way. But he kept glancing over at the Alphas on the TV. Going out, he gave me the old salute and big smile but I could tell he was thinking off somewhere, not keeping his mind and his hands on the redhead. Which wasn't like him.

© 1994 by Abbenford Associates

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mitchell's been my buddy since the earth's crust cooled off. I can read him pretty well. We graduated high school about the time the dinosaurs started up and went into farm equipment sales together when there were still a few nickels to make in that game. I've seen Mitchell bareass in the woods howling around a campfire, watched him pulling in six-foot tuna off the back of McKenzie's old boat, laughed when he was drunk up to his eyeballs with a big brassy broad on each arm and a shitass happy grin. For sure I know him better than any of his goddamn two ex-wives or his three kids. None of them'd recognize him on the street, pretty near.

So when the Alphas showed up right here in Fairhope I could tell right away that Mitchell took it funny. These Alphas come in slick as you please, special escort in limos and all. They go down to the wharf and look at the big new Civic Center and all, but nobody has a dime's worth of idea what they're here for.

Neither does the escort. Two suits on every Alpha, dark glasses and shoulder-slung pistols and earplug radios and the like. You could see it plain, the way their tight mouths twitched. They dunno from sour owl shit what to expect next.

For sure nobody thought they'd go into Nan's. Just clank on in, look around, babble that babble to each other, plunk down on those chrome stools.

Then they order up. Mitchell and me, we was at the other end of the bar. The Alphas, they are ordering up and putting them down pretty quick. Nobody knows their chemistry but they must like something in gimlets and fireballs and twofers, cause they sure squirt them in quick.

Pretty soon there's a crowd around them. The suits stand stiff as boards, but the locals ooze around them, curious. The Alphas don't pay any attention. Maybe they're used to it or maybe they don't even know people are there unless they need something. Way they act, you could believe that.

But Mitchell, he keeps eyeing them. Tries to talk to them. They don't pay him no never mind. Buys one a drink, even, but the Alpha won't touch it.

I could see it got to him. Not the first day maybe or the second. By the third, though, he was acting funny. Studying them. The Alphas would show up at Nan's, suck in plenty of the sauce, then blow out of town in those limos.

News people around, crowds waiting to see them, the whole goddamn shooting match. Made Fairhope hell to get around in.

I was gone three days to Birmingham on a commission job with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

International Harvester, so I didn't see what started him on it. I come into town all busted out from chasing tail in Birmingham and first thing you know, phone rings and Mitchell wants help.

"I'm in that beat up shack back of Leroy's TV," he said.

"That place's no biggern a coffin and smells worse."

"They spruced it up since Briggs run that poker game in here."

"So who you pokin there now?"

"Fred, your dick fell off your I.Q. would be zero."

"That happen, what'd I need to think for?"

"Get your dumb ass over here."

So I did. Walk in on Mitchell in a chair, this brunette working on him. First I figured she was from over Bessie's, giving him a manicure with her kit all spread out. Turns out she's a makeup gal from clear over to New Orleans. Works Mardi Gras and like that.

Only she's not making Mitchell up to be a devil or in blackface or anything. This is serious. She's painting shellack all over him. He's already got a crust on him like dried mud in a hog wallow, only it's orange.

"Christ on a crutch," is all I can say.

"Mix me a bourbon and branch." Mitchell's voice came out muffled by all these pink pancake-size wattles on his throat, like some kind of rooster.

So I do. Only he doesn't like it, so he gets up and makes his own. "Got to add a twist sometimes," he says.

Mitchell was always picky about drinks. He used to make coffee for the boys, morning after a big carouse, and it had to be Colombian and ground just so and done up in this tricky filter rig he made himself out of tin sheeting.

That's how he was with this makeup girl, too. She layered on ridges of swarthy gum all down his arms, then shaped it with little whittling tools. She was sweating in that firebox shack. Mitchell was too under all the makeup.

I'm wondering what the hell, and Mitchell says, "Go take a squint, see if they're in Nan's yet."

So I'm catching on. Mitchell's always had something working on the side, see, but he takes his time about letting on. Kind of subtle, too. When Mr. Tang moved into Fairhope with his factory, Mitchell was real respectful and polite and called him Poon for a year before that Tang caught on.

As I go out the shack and down the alley I see why he used that place. I angle across Simpson's parking lot and down by those big air conditioners and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pop out on Ivy right next to Nan's. That way, none of the suits can see you coming. Slip in the side door and sure as God's got a beard, there's three Alphas. Got a crowd around them but the room is dead quiet. People just looking and wondering and the aliens drinking.

I'd heard that plenty of fastlane operators were trying to get information out of Alphas, seeing as they got all this technology. We didn't even see them coming, that's how good their stuff is.

First thing anybody knew, they were bellying up to Venus, this other planet out there. Covered in clouds, it was. Then the Alphas start to work on her. First thing you know, you can see those volcanoes and valleys.

Anybody who can clear up muggy air like that inside a week, you got to pay attention. Turned out that was just cleaning off the work bench. Next they spun a kind of magnetic rod, rammed it in at the pole, clean down into the core of the whole damn planet. Easy as sticking an ice pick through an apple. Only the ice pick was hollow and they sucked the liquid metal out of there. Up the rod like it was a straw, and out into space. To make those metal city kind of things, huge and all.

That's when people started getting really afraid. And some others got really interested. The way they figured, any little scrappy thing you got from an Alpha might just be a billion-buck trick.

That's the scoop I heard on CNN coming down from Birmingham, anyway. Now here was the whole circus in Fairhope, big as life and twice as ugly. Snoops with those directional microphones. Cameras in the backs of vans, shooting out through dark windows. Guys in three-piece suits kind of casual slouched against the bar and trying to get an Alpha to notice them.

So back I go. Mitchell is getting some inflated bags stuck on him by the makeup girl. Bags all over his back and chest and neck even. He's all the Alpha colors now, from Georgia clay red here to sky blue there.

"Three of 'em sucking it up in there," I said.

"Holy shit, let's go," Mitchell croaks back at me. The girl had fitted him out with this voicebox thing, made him sound like a frog at the bottom of a rain barrel.

The girl pats him all over with that fine, rusty dust the Alphas are always shedding. She straightens the pouches so you can hardly see that his arms are too short for an Alpha.

"Let's make tracks," Mitchell says, and proceeds to do just that. Alpha

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tracks, fat and seven-toed.

We go across the parking lot, so the escorts can't see. In a minute we're in Nan's. The other Alphas don't take any notice of Mitchell but all the people do. They move out of the way fast and we parade in, me a little behind so it'll seem like I was just a tourist. Mitchell's got the Alpha shuffle down just right, to my eye.

Bold as brass, he sits down. The suits look at each other, dunno what to do. But they buy it, that Mitchell's one of them.

The Alphas still don't notice him. Bartender asks and Mitchell orders, making a kind of slithery noise.

He slurps down two drinks before anything happens. An Alpha makes a gesture with that nose thing of theirs and Mitchell does too. Then there's some more gesturing and they talk like wet things moving inside a bag.

I sit and listen but I can't make sense out of any of it. Mitchell seems to know what he's doing. He keeps it up for maybe five more minutes. I can see it's wearing on him. He gives me the signal.

I clear some space for him so he can get back up — that crap he was wearing weighs real considerable. He gets up smooth and shuffles some and then we're out the door. Free and clean. We got back to the shack before we let go with the whooping and hollering.

We pull it off four more times in the next three weeks. Each time the Alphas take more notice of Mitchell. Hard to know what they think of him. The girl comes over from New Orleans and does him up, getting better each time. I keep an ear open for word on the street and it's all good.

Or seems so to me, anyway. Everybody thinks Mitchell's the real thing. Course that's people talking, not Alphas. After the fourth time I couldn't hold back any more. "You got some money angle on this, right?"

"Money?"

"What I want to know is, how you going to get anything out of them?"

"I'm not in for money."

"You figure maybe you can get one of those little tool kits they carry? They don't look hooked on real firm or anything."

Mitchell grinned. "Wouldn't try that, I was you. Fella in Cincinnati went to lift one, came up an arm short."

"Then what the hell you in for?"

Mitchell gave me this funny look. "Cause it's *them*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I blinked. "So goddamn what?"

"You don't get it, Fred. Thing about aliens is, they're alien." In his eyes there's this look. Like he was seeing something different, something important, something way bigger than Fairhope.

I couldn't make any more sense out of what he said after that. That's when I realized. Mitchell just wanted to be close to them, was all.

That pretty well took the wind out of my sails. I'd figured Mitchell was onto something for sure. I went with him one more time, that's all. And a few days later I heard that the same Alpha was coming back to Nan's every day, just sitting and waiting for more Alphas to come in, and hanging out with them when they did.

It went that way for a while and I was feeling pretty sour about it. I went on a carouse with the Perlotti brothers and had me a pretty fair time. Next morning I was lying in bed with a head that barely fit in the room and in walks Mitchell. "Heard you maybe needed some revivin' from last night."

He was grinning and I was glad to see him even if he did waste a slab of my time. We'd do little things like that for each other sometimes, bring a fella a drink or a hundred dollar bill when he was down and could sure use it. So I crawled up out of bed and pulled on some jeans and went into the kitchen.

Mitchell was filling a pot and popping open one of his Colombian coffee packs. I got some cups and we watched the water boil without saying anything. That's when it happened.

Mitchell was fooling with the coffee and I was still pretty bleary-eyed, so I'm not sure just exactly what I saw. Mitchell was stirring the coffee and he turned to me. "Ummm. Smell those enzymes."

He said it perfectly natural and I wouldn't have taken much notice of the funny word. I looked it up later at the library and it's a chemical term, I forget what it means. Mitchell would never have said something like that. And I wouldn't have given it any mind, except that just then his arm stuck a little farther out of the denim work shirt he had on. He has big arms and thick wrists. As the shirt slid up I saw the skin and curly hair and then something else.

At first I thought it was leather. Then it seemed like cloth, real old fabric, wrinkled and coarse. Mitchell turned further and looked at me and that's when I heard the sound of him moving. It was like dry leaves rustling. Old and blowing in a wind. In the next second I caught a whiff of it and the worse smell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I ever knew came swarming up into my head and I finally really saw what the thing next to me was.

I don't want to describe that. It sent me banging back against the plywood wall of the kitchen and then out the door. The smell stayed with me somehow even in the open. I was off into the pines way back of my place before I knew it.

I had the shakes for hours. Made myself circle around for three miles. Got to my sister's place. Didn't tell her anything about it but I think she might of guessed. I was pale and woozy.

I got my truck and went off to Pensacola for a week. There was maybe some work there but it didn't pan out and I hadn't gone for that anyway.

I didn't go back into my place for another week. And I was real careful when I did.

It was all picked up, neat as you please. Not a sign. Mitchell was a fine man but he would never have done that.

I stood in the kitchen and tried to work out what had happened, how it had been. Couldn't. There was that one second when I saw straight into whatever was there and being Mitchell, and that was all.

He had tried to blend in with them. And I'd helped him. So in some way maybe this was the reverse. Or a pay back, kind of. Or maybe a signal or something. No way to tell.

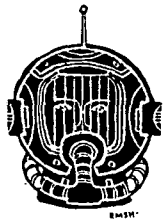
Only, you know what I think? I figure there isn't any Mitchell anymore. There's something else.

Now, could be there's still some Mitchell in there, only he can't get out. Or maybe that thing's Alpha for sure. I guess it could be something in between. Only thing I know is, it isn't anything I ever want to know.

Maybe it's something I *can't* know. Thing about aliens is, they're alien.

They say that one Alpha still hangs out at Nan's. I haven't been to check. I don't even walk down that part of town anymore.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION

CHARLES PLATT

TRADING DATA WITH DEAD AND DIGITAL

LET ME TAKE you on a journey into cyberspace. Not the glitzed-up version, with brain implants and intrusion countermeasures that can fry a hacker's frontal lobes. What I'm talking about is cyberspace in the real world.

Early in the 1970s, a bunch of leftover sixties radicals put out a little amateur typewritten magazine that called itself *Tap*. It was an anarchist instruction manual, with detailed plans for defrauding parking meters and stealing electricity from your local utility company. But most of all, it focused on the telephone system: how to penetrate it, and what fun you could have when you were in there.

The staff of *Tap* held meetings once a month in Manhattan, on Broadway near Twenty-Eighth Street, in a sleazy little office full of broken-down furniture. I convinced them that I was a fellow traveler, and they let me hang around. At a typical meeting, a shifty-eyed individual brought in crumpled schematic diagrams for an electronic burglar alarm used in midtown jewelry stores, and the editor of *Tap* showed him how to defeat it. People talked a lot about "blue boxes," which accessed the phone system by emitting tone sequences, and I browsed through correspondence from the jail cell of John Draper, a pioneering "phone phreak" who had used his blue box a couple thousand times too often and had gotten caught.

No doubt about it, *Tap* was a hotbed of criminal activity. But there was more, here, than ordinary crime: a dawning understanding of how to co-opt technology in order to transcend the limits of everyday life. (This, incidentally, is a major theme in science fiction.) *Tap* was the cyber-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

womb in which hacking was conceived, before it even had a name.

Time passed. *Tap*'s members drifted away, but out in California, a whole new wave was breaking. A man named Steve Wozniak designed a computer called an Apple. John Draper (now out of jail) designed for it a programmable modem called the Apple Cat. And cyberspace was born.

A modem is a translation device. It takes the output from a computer, converts it into tones, and sends it down a telephone line. At the other end of the line, another modem turns the tones back into text or numbers that a computer can understand.

Imagine you're ten or twelve years old, a science nerd with a lot of free time and a bad attitude. Using your modem, you can browse through data in huge computers thousands of miles away, or eavesdrop on signal traffic in satellites in space. If you do the job right, the phone calls won't even cost you anything. You're untouchable, invisible, and omnipotent.

Now add another ingredient: the Bulletin Board System, or BBS. The first BBS was a computer programmed to answer phone calls automatically, so outsiders could dial in and leave messages for each other on the hard drive. Soon people were using BBSs for trading bootleg software, playing games online, and making contact with hackers on the other side of the planet.

More time passed. By the 1990s, there were about 50,000 BBSs across the United States, and most were legitimate businesses, including giants such as CompuServe, GEnie, and Prodigy that served more than a million users altogether. I started to wonder if this informal network of BBSs could be used as an alternate way of distributing science fiction, in the form of electronic text. To get a better idea of the possibilities, I needed to talk to people who were actively involved. So I went to Citicorp Center in midtown Manhattan, where I'd heard that a crowd of hackers got together around six P.M. on the first Friday of each month.

It was an odd place for a meeting. There were pizza restaurants and cafés around the edges of a big atrium like a shopping mall, with trees in tubs and mercury vapor lights beaming down from a ceiling high above. But in one corner was a cluster of pay phones, and around the phones was a cluster of young male computer nerds.

Soon I was talking to Bruce Fancher, the co-owner of a fast-growing local BBS named MindVox. Aged twenty-two, Bruce was an elder statesman compared with the teenagers who composed most of the group. He was calm, quiet, and good-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looking — handsome, even, in a conventional way — which was another attribute that set him apart. I learned that his father had been the first publisher of New York's radical-left newspaper, *The Village Voice*. Bruce had come from a literary family, and it showed.

He told me he'd gotten into computers after his parents gave him an Apple II when he was thirteen. "I used to get up at five A.M., before school," he said, "so I could monopolize the phone line. I logged onto boards all over the country, and it was like tribes meeting at oases in the desert. A lot of legend and storytelling went on. We all hid ourselves behind fantastic names, and I wasn't just Bruce Fancher, limited to the things teenagers could do. I was a notorious hacker dude with 'associates' in California."

When the feds started raiding people, Bruce happened to be out of town. By the time he got back, many of his friends had been busted. That was when he decided it was time to do something completely legal for a change. He started MindVox in collaboration with another ex-hacker named Patrick Kroupa, and it took all the money that Bruce had been saving for college.

They were shrewd and ambitious, and they quickly built it up to the point where it had thirty-two phone lines, more than 3,000 users, and an 800 information number. Soon, Bruce told me, they would have local access numbers all over the country. "You should come by the office some time, and take a look," he said.

So I did.

By coincidence, the office turned out to be on Broadway, less than five blocks from where *Tap* had been. I went there around eleven o'clock on a drizzly night, and the street was desolate and spooky at that hour, with 100-year-old stone-faced office buildings looming like dark tombstones against a cloudy sky that glowed dim orange, lit by the city below.

I took an elevator up to the eleventh floor, walked down a mosaic-tiled hallway, and here it was, the corporate headquarters of MindVox, about twelve feet by twenty, with plain white walls and utilitarian fluorescent lights. The place was cleaner than *Tap*, but the furniture looked the same — battered wooden desks that seemed to have been dragged in off the street.

The computer equipment, however, was something else. Bruce showed me two Sun workstations worth about $10,000 apiece, not much bigger than pizza boxes, host-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing the BBS. They were linked via a slim black Ethernet cable with another box called a terminal server, and there were book-sized modems stacked in piles, red LEDs flickering as message traffic flowed through in and out of the phone system.

Altogether I counted more than $50,000 worth of hardware, including the Sun computers and a NeXT and a Macintosh and even an Amiga, which Bruce said they used mainly for video games. The sleek metal and plastic cabinets were laid out haphazardly, some on the rickety furniture, some on the floor. Tangled wires were everywhere. Evidently, no one cared too much about physical appearances; what mattered was the electronic world inside the system. When a user logged onto MindVox, the text on the screen wasn't laid out haphazardly, it looked highly professional. So who cared about furniture?

Bruce's partner Patrick arrived. He was twenty-five, tall, well-muscled, with long hair and a hippie-style bandana. His smile was broad, and he seemed very laid-back, though there was a restlessness in him that told me he might not really be as easygoing as he seemed.

It turned out Patrick had been imprinted by computers when he was just seven years old. "My father was a physicist working at the National Center for Atmospheric Research," he said. "He showed me their Cray supercomputer, which was one of the first two Crays ever built. There it was, the most powerful type of computer in the world, in a room that had been designed around it. And they let me feed punched cards into the card reader."

Patrick acquired an Apple II a couple years later. "In those days I was a phone phreak, using a blue box, setting up massive conference calls, calling people I'd only read about in books — such as Steve Wozniak, the guy who designed the Apple. He was real nice, very easy to talk to. But then I got a modem, and everything changed. It was an Apple Cat, a wholly superior product. You could make it do tones of your choice, I mean *any* tones. I started writing programs which I called Phantom Access. They were — tools to access things."

When he wasn't getting into systems where he didn't belong, Bruce was logging on to BBSs, trading data and playing games with other hackers. The BBSs had exotic names, like The Safe House, The Legion of Doom, The Magic Chalice, and The Adventurers' Tavern. The kids had exotic names, too. Patrick called himself "Lord Digital." And one of the people he traded data with was a guy who called himself "Dead," because he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was into H.P. Lovecraft and horror movies. They became friends online, but four years went by before they learned each others' real names. Finally, "Dead" revealed himself as Bruce Fancher. Still another year passed before they finally met in person.

Patrick showed me some of the things that MindVox could do via a leased line connecting it with the Internet, which is the biggest network of all, with more than six million users, including major universities, laboratories, libraries, and corporations around the world. The Internet offers news reports on every conceivable topic, public-domain software, libraries online — and this is all available to MindVox subscribers for a flat fee of $10 a month.

I asked Bruce and Patrick if they were interested in science fiction. Patrick named A.E. van Vogt and James Blish as authors he enjoyed. But, "Michael Moorcock I followed obsessively. I was just starting to experiment with drugs, and discovering I had personal problems, so it was easy to identify with Moorcock's hero, Elric, who was always twisted up and had some sort of problem. Then I discovered *The Cornelius Chronicles*, and from there I got into the British New Wave movement, all those old British books, most of them out of print in the U.S. The New Wave fascinated me, because it seemed to break through the boundaries. An entire group of people realized that something magical was going on, tied in with music and art, and it was intelligent yet romantic at the same time. It blew my mind."

But what about William Gibson? Wasn't he an influence on the hacker world?

"Actually, *True Names* by Vernor Vinge came first," said Patrick, "and that book was more technically accurate. But Gibson came along when networks still didn't quite exist, and he inspired people to want them to exist, by creating a mythology, a vision of how it could be. In 1984 when *Neuromancer* came out, I looked at it and thought — Okay, I could live in this."

Bruce told me that most hackers shared a similar interest in science fiction. "Just look at the names they used," he pointed out. "Thomas Covenant was a big hacker. Every character in *Dune* had a modem equivalent. And a lot of BBSs styled themselves after various books. You'd log on, and there'd be text on the screen telling you you were entering a space station, or something like that. There were a lot of fantasy and science-fiction motifs."

I myself had been part of the so-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

called New Wave, back in the 1960s, so it felt a little strange to be talking to these guys of twenty-two and twenty-five, who found out about it by reading old books and were now hoping for a similar burst of innovation in the nineties, maybe with them located someplace near the center. Their electronic realm had grown out of the pages of science fiction; in which case, maybe science fiction could now find a place in the electronic realm. Specifically: would Patrick and Bruce put science fiction on their BBS?

Sure, they said, why not?

I saw several advantages. The current publishing and distribution system is less and less able to keep books in print. Many paperbacks have a shelf life of a month, and go out of print soon after that. Even the works of Robert Heinlein are becoming unavailable, and a lot of classics of the field are almost impossible to find.

Electronic storage can eliminate this. It costs virtually nothing to store text on a disk; and through BBSs such as MindVox, the text can be accessed from anywhere in the world.

Of course, there are snags. Most people are still using modems that send and receive 2400 bits (of data) per second. At that rate, it can take an hour to download a novel. But the modems at MindVox can run at 19,200 bps, and it's only a matter of time till users acquire similar equipment. At that speed, with data compression, a book can be transmitted in around three minutes.

Even so, the user still has to face the unappetizing prospect of reading text off the screen. Still, the video displays on laptop computers are gradually improving, and within a few years, we should surely see an affordable, portable PC that's as easy to read as a book — and not much larger.

In its current form, electronic text is easily copied. Piracy is a definite problem, and as yet, there's no easy way to prevent it. For this reason, it's unwise to put your text into electronic form before it's been conventionally published. For the time being, at least, the main appeal of electronic text is for books which are currently out of print and would be completely unavailable otherwise.

Right now, electronic text has no large sponsors. The publishing industry seems uninterested, and the computer industry is more concerned with developing exotic technologies such as interactive full-motion video transmitted through fiber-optic cable.

So maybe it's time to take matters into our own hands. The nets are open to us, serving thousands of com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

puter users who are interested in science fiction and use text as their primary medium of exchange. It seems to me we'd be foolish not to take advantage of this situation, while it lasts.

This, right now, is the real promise of "cyberspace."

Anyone interested in MindVox can dial it via modem at (212) 989-4141. Those without modems can call 1-800-MINDVOX for information. Writers who'd like to store their work on MindVox can contact me direct at 9 Patchin Place, New York, NY 10011, or via e-mail at my Internet address, which is charles@mindvox.phantom.com. A royalty system is available.

"Your computers are down? Maybe I can help."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gary Couzens is a British writer who has sold short fiction to anthologies and fiction magazines in the U.K. He writes a regular film column in Exuberance, *and has sold non-fiction on film and theater. "Second Contact" marks his first publication outside of Great Britain.*

Second Contact

By Gary Couzens

WEDNESDAY 11TH AUGUST 1999. It is not Judgment Day.

As the train pulls into Penzance, Mary Beth yawns and stretches. She hasn't slept well in the hard narrow seat. Her clothes — UCLA sweatshirt over T-shirt, jeans — are gritty and grimy from dried perspiration and two days' wear. She reaches up for her backpack. Dizziness as she stands: breakfast and coffee will cure it. She undoes the rubber band holding her hair back, shakes her hair out, then ties it again in a ponytail. She strides down the platform, her ticket ready for inspection. It's still cool at this time, 8:30. Salt is in the air; seagulls squall. She visits the rest room to wash under her arms, clean her teeth, freshen up.

Tonight she'll sleep better: she's booked ahead at the Youth Hostel here in Penzance. It'll be hot today, few if any clouds. She won't be disappointed. No clouds will hide the sun, not today of all days. Britain's notoriously unpredictable weather won't spoil everything.

She goes into the small station buffet and on impulse buys a newspaper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She's made a point of disregarding the news during her two months in Europe, especially what's been happening back home — strife and race riots. Too depressing — she'll bone up on all that when she returns to California in September. She sits down at the corner of a table with a Brunch Muffin and a plastic cup of coffee almost too hot to touch. Traveling on a budget: it appeals to her ascetic side, and keeps her slim.

Mary Beth left Amy, the college friend she was traveling with, behind in London. Amy hadn't wanted to come with her to Cornwall: London was much more interesting to her. "I can see it on TV," she said. "You'll get a better view that way."

"It's not the same," said Mary Beth.

So Amy went with her to Paddington, saw her off on the overnight train. They kissed, embraced, promised to meet up again at the end of the week. Mary Beth waved at Amy as the train pulled out; just as Amy slipped out of sight, Mary Beth saw her turn and walk away down the platform. *It's all or nothing now*, she thought. This was why she'd insisted on being in England in August, rather than anywhere else in Europe. Mary Beth's obsession, as the much more sanguine Amy put it.

In the newsstand, the local paper has a large headline: ECLIPSE DAY!

As she sits at the table — alone now except for a late-thirties man with thinning hair sitting opposite — an elderly man strides past and slaps something onto the table. Both Mary Beth and the other man look at it simultaneously, catch each other's gaze, smile.

The elderly man has left a crudely printed flier on the table: *REPENT FOR JUDGMENT DAY IS AT HAND*, it says.

Mary Beth glances about her. It's a weekday morning in Penzance; men and women are traveling to work. Children are out of school for the summer. She is just one amongst many to pass through this station. There is nothing unusual about today. Except for one thing, there *will* be nothing unusual. It is not Judgment Day.

Clive sips his coffee and idly watches the young American woman. A student, obviously: he got her nationality from her accent when she spoke to the woman behind the counter. She must be about twenty, he guesses; five foot ten tall, tanned, honey-blonde hair tied back with a rubber band.

Their eyes meet. "Hi," she says.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hello. You were on the train, weren't you?"

She nods. "It was so *uncomfortable.* Jeez."

"Wasn't it just. And I had a sleeper. So much for British Rail."

"So you come from London?"

"Well, the Home Counties, actually. Surrey. How about yourself?"

"L.A. I'm on vacation. In Europe for three months."

There's a pause, then Clive says: "You're here for the eclipse?"

She nods, her mouth full of Brunch Muffin.

"Me too. I'm going to take the bus to St. Just. You'll get a better view of it from there. The path of totality goes through it. It's a church town, twenty-five minutes away."

"Sounds like a neat place."

"It's quite pretty, I'm told. It's been developed a bit in the past few years, though."

And so they tacitly agree to travel together. Clive guesses she senses he's no threat to her. She's intelligent,and her intuition is sharp. He radiates no sexual interest in her.

He said good-bye to his lover Mark at Paddington. They'd spent the evening watching *Nashville,* as ever one of Clive's favorite films, in an all-but-empty London cinema club. The print was faded and scratched, and jumped in places, but the film is an old friend; Clive's memory filled in the blank spots, resonated with familiar scenes, settled into the characters' interlocking stories as if into a comfortable, well-worn chair. It had been several years since he'd seen it, but it's a film that he's marked stages in his personal development by, in the way it changes at each viewing. His only regret is that he wasn't old enough to see it on its first release, in a virgin print.

They kissed good-bye on Paddington platform. Mark would be visiting a dying friend in the North, while Clive made his pilgrimage to Cornwall.

Clive's parents woke him one night in July 1969, just short of his fifth birthday, to watch live coverage of Neil Armstrong making one small step for a man. To his chagrin he doesn't remember that, although he remembers watching later Apollos on TV. And all the space missions after that: Apollo-Soyuz, Skylab, the Space Shuttle. This total eclipse will be the only one visible in Britain during his lifetime, and he's made a pact with his younger self to witness it. He's taken time off work to do just that.

He and the American leave the station buffet, walk outside into the car

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

park. It's a quarter to nine, and the sky is brightening. He points out to her St. Michael's Mount, still wreathed in morning mist. he is the host, she the guest in his country; he feels obliged to show her the more famous sights. The sun is still full: first contact, when the Moon's disc clips the Sun's, is an hour and three quarters away. Perhaps he'll show her around Penzance first before they take the St. Just bus in time for second contact, when the eclipse becomes total, at 11:10.

"I'm Clive, by the way." He extends his hand.

She takes it. "Mary Beth."

"Ready," says Tom the director, and the red light on top of the camera turns on.

Diana imperceptibly breathes in and says: "Thanks, Michael. It's ten o'clock here in Penzance. The eclipse isn't due to start until 10:30, but already crowds have gathered for this rare astronomical event." She steps to one side and turns her head. The camera follows her gaze and looks over the railings to the narrow beach — if beach isn't too grandiose a word. Nearly five hundred people are standing on the pebbles, looking up at the sun, holding up squares of smoked glass to test them, or projecting through telescopes onto white card. The tide laps about the ankles of the furthest out, but they're oblivious to it. Some are sitting on the sand, others in swimsuits squatting in the water. At the far end, a small group of women are sunbathing topless.

"This is Diana Mathis, BBC News in Penzance."

The red light goes out, and Diana sighs audibly. "Shit! I've got a fucking ladder!" She bends forward, picks at her tights with her fingers.

"It didn't show," says Tom.

Diana looks up. "Good." She straightens. "I haven't got a spare pair on me. There's no way we've got time to buy one." She glances down ruefully at the ladder, tugs half-heartedly at the hem of her skirt in an effort to cover it. "Oh *fuck it.*"

"You were good, Di," says Tom.

"I should fucking well hope so," says Diana. "I've done it long enough." She glances up at Tom; their eyes meet briefly. A flicker of a smile. Professional to a fault while at work; she prides herself on that. Even though every member of the crew knows she and Tom are lovers.

Diana straightens, lights a cigarette. She never smokes on screen; she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

remembers the furor when a children's TV presenter was filmed unawares doing it. But there's a few minutes that can be snatched before they have to film again, when she has to readopt her public face. Fortunately no one stares at them, or tries to get in the way of the camera. And no one questions the presence of a black woman amongst three older white men.

TV crews will be numerous today. The BBC itself has two at the ready: one at St. Just to film the eclipse itself, plus Diana's to get the human interest angles.

"Don't all relax at once, guys," she says. "We've got that village to do next. Got some locals to talk to. Eleven-fifteen and it'll all be over, and we can get a drink. Or several."

ADRIAN PUSHES the last newspaper through the last front door on his round and cycles down Trezillan's narrow high street to the corner shop. He secures his bicycle and goes in.

He sees Morwenna talking to someone so he lingers at the door. The man is tall and about Morwenna's age. You can tell from the way she's laughing, from the way she's leaning forward intently that she fancies him. She's wearing a flimsy summer dress and you can see the top of her cleavage. Adrian looks down and uncomfortably shuffles his feet.

Morwenna looks up and sees him standing there. She waves at him. "Hi, Adrian!"

The man straightens. "Well, I'll see you this evening, Morwenna."

"Sure."

Adrian expects them to kiss, but they don't. The man walks past him without saying a word. The doorbell *tings* as he goes out.

"Well, that was quick," says Morwenna. "You've finished your round already. Good boy. Give you a kiss."

She comes out from behind the counter and stands next to him. She's still taller than him, but he's growing fast. She's much too old for him of course, but he knows he's in love with her. She shakes out her long frizzy red hair. "It's going to be a *wonderful* day." She's standing by the window where the sun comes in: it makes her dress translucent and you can see her knickers. She's not wearing a bra.

Morwenna Hughes was her father's last child, late and unexpected. From

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what Adrian can gather, she lived for a while in Truro with a married man. But that didn't work out, so she came back to Trezillan and runs the corner shop now that her father has retired.

She stretches her arms out behind her head, her back arching slightly. She reminds Adrian of a cat luxuriating in the sun. He wonders what she looks like naked.

"What are you doing this morning, Adrian?" she asks.

"I want to watch the eclipse," he says.

"Mmmm, so do I. Should be good." There will be a fête in the village hall and grounds this morning. Mrs. Weldon, the local councilor, has used one of her contacts; the BBC are sending a crew to film the eclipse from Trezillan. "Tell you what, is your Mum going?"

"No, she's at work."

"Oh, that's a pity. I'll run you up there if you like."

"Yes, please."

"Just help me shut up shop. I need a wee." She leans forward, touching his upper lip with her forefinger. For a moment he thinks she's wiping a smudge off his cheek, just like his mother used to do. "Coo, look," she says. "You're growing a mustache."

As he waits for her, he feels in his pocket for the scraps of old photographic negative the papers and TV said he should use to view the eclipse. He glances at the rack of cards. It's Morwenna's birthday next week; she'll be twenty-five. He must buy her a card, but how can he do that without her knowing? There's no other place in the village to buy them. And would she pay more attention to him? She's twelve years older than he is. No chance.

At 10:30 the eclipse becomes partial. Through most of Britain it will be no more than that. But in Cornwall it continues its advance, a semicircular bite widening, black spreading over fire yellow. People look up at the sun, then take it for granted as they continue their tasks. But more and more abandon them as totality nears. The beach at Penzance is filled with watchers; it's too crowded to move. Some swim out and tread water to get a better view, squares of photographic negative on chains about their necks. A teenage girl faints in the heat and an ambulance man forces his way through the press of people and carries her out. They sit her on the steps leading down from the pavement, her head resting on her knees.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Clive and Mary Beth leave the bus at St. Just, the eclipse is only just partial, a black mouse-nibble at the top. They walk toward the town center, across the green with its gray stone war memorial, into the square. The pub is open, earlier than usual, and the outside chairs and tables are already full.

They go into the corner shop and buy packets of crisps to munch. Mary Beth buys a bottle of mineral water, Clive cider. At the edge of the square a portly middle-aged man has parked an ice-cream van. They buy a cornet each. Clive hasn't eaten ice cream in years; it's the traditional Cornish variety. The cold shocks the inside of his mouth; he eats the ice cream in quick gulping bites before it melts.

"You ever been here before?" asks Mary Beth.

"No, never. I've been to Penzance, years ago, when I was a child." He rubs his chin, the prickly stubble. Different from the picture of professional respectability his work colleagues see. He'll spend a day unshaven, just for once.

"I've never been to Europe before," says Mary Beth. "And when I heard there was going to be this eclipse, I just had to come along. I'd never seen one."

"It'll be quite a spectacle."

"Sure." She touches him lightly on the elbow. So self-confident. That is what he likes about her but wonders most at. Perhaps it comes with being American, he thinks: a self-confident race. It took him years to gather any sort of poise: he had shyness to overcome, and had to accustom himself to being gay.

They walk past the pub and down a side street toward a small church. Just before it is a graveyard. Already there's a crowd, some of them sitting on the headstones. People of all ages from babes-in-arms to a ninety-something woman in a wheelchair. Most of them have smoked glass or photographic negatives, some of them have telescopes set up to project the sun's light onto cards. They've passed several TV crews on the way here, but many other people have their own cameras, still or cine, or camcorders. Others are sitting on the ground with instruments Clive can only guess the function of. There are journalists here, too, who'll send their copy through by cellfax when it's all over. He instinctively feels inside his grip for his own camera, to check it's still there. They sit down on the grass verge. She pulls her sweatshirt off

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over her head, drapes it over her shoulder. Clive notes the beads of perspiration on her upper lip, the damp dark circles under the arms of her T-shirt.

"Is that your lunch?" he asks, looking at the bag of crisps, the bread rolls and cheese.

She grins. "I don't eat much."

"Traveling on a budget. I used to do that. A good way to crash-diet."

She nods, grins: Then she asks: "Where did you go?"

"Oh, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland. . . "

"I've been there, too. There's some neat places there. I'd like to see Eastern Europe if I have the time."

"Well, you've got plenty of time to do it in, Mary Beth. That was when I was a student, myself."

"Before you settled down?"

"I'm not married, if that's what you mean."

"I figured you weren't."

"I'm gay, actually."

She raises her eyebrows. "Really? Oh, fine."

They sit in silence for a while. Clive's words have inhibited Mary Beth. She hadn't realized he was gay, but perhaps that was why she felt safe with him. It's not that she's unused to homosexuals: there are enough of them at college, after all, some of whom — of both sexes — she counts as friends. Just a little disappointment: she has found him attractive, in a middle-aged kind of way. But it was only an idle fantasy: she's committed to Todd, halfway across the world now. They're already living together and, when the next semester starts, they'll announce their engagement.

She loops her arms about her legs and draws them in to herself, resting her chin on her knees.

"Have you got a boyfriend?" she asks.

"Yes, I have. His name's Mark. He's five years younger than me. He's gone up North. A friend of ours is dying of AIDS."

"I'm sorry. Todd's the same. He had to stay behind; his Mom's very ill. Cancer."

"I'm sorry for you both."

Connections. Things in common. Mary Beth likes to find them. The similarities between her, a twenty-year-old Californian heterosexual woman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and this at-least-fifteen-years-older English male homosexual. The coincidence of objective and meeting. The randomness from which your life coalesces, the unknown strange attractors that shape it. *I sound like Todd, explaining what he does to me,* she thinks. Todd is a mathematician working in Chaos Theory. She met him at a faculty dance and was attracted to him immediately. He's tall, six four, tanned and blond, archetypal beach-Californian. She carries a photo of him in her backpack.

"You know," Clive says. "I've heard so much about this eclipse. I used to be really into astronomy when I was younger. They all mentioned this eclipse in Cornwall in 1999. I just had to go and see it. Judging by Penzance and here, it looks like lots of people felt the same."

"Well, it is a rare event."

"The only total solar eclipse visible from the British Isles since 1954, and it'll be a long time until the next one. The newspapers and TV have been full of it." He remembers an animated diagram on one of the TV programs, inscribing the Line of View on a map of Cornwall from north of Penzance to south of Truro.

"Jeez, I never realized it was such a big deal," says Mary Beth. "Suppose I should've guessed."

The van bumps as it goes up the hill toward Trezillan. "Fucking backwater," Diana mutters. "It's in the middle of fucking nowhere." She takes a long drag on her cigarette.

"Well, we're on the right track now," says Tom. "We won't miss anything."

"Why couldn't a local crew do this?" Diana goes on. "They'll at least know where the tinpot little place is. Oh, no, Diana'll do it. Good old Di. Give her the shit no one else wants."

"We're here," says Tom. They pull up in the carpark by the village hall, on the edge of the green. A space is reserved for them. Stalls have been set up; music plays from a ghetto blaster at one end. It's mostly women here, Diana notices: women with young children in tow, women who don't work outside the house.

She renews her lipstick and steps out of the van. Tom goes back to help with the camera and sound equipment. Diana stands at the edge of the green; a fiftyish woman in a dark suit strides across the grass toward her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Diana Mathis?"

"Yes, that's me."

The woman extends a hand; Diana takes it. "Good morning, Ms. Mathis. I'm Margaret Weldon, the local councilor. We're very privileged to have you here."

Diana smiles. So many people thought the presence of a TV camera was doing them a favor. She knows this woman pulled a few strings to get the BBC here; the event will add to her prestige. "Well, it's not every day this sort of thing happens."

Margaret Weldon smiles broadly. "Yes, it is rather exciting, isn't it? I didn't realize they were quite so rare. And it's such a lovely day for it, too. . . "

The woman is much too fluttery for Diana's taste. She continues talking as she leads Diana and the crew to the main marquee. "Do have a look around if you have time. We do take pride in our unspoiled little village. And I'd be very grateful if you'd have lunch with me."

Silly old cow, thinks Diana. *She probably doesn't get too much excitement in her life.* The soundman makes a chatterbox gesture behind Margaret Weldon's back. Diana grins, and puts her finger to her lips.

At the other side of the green, Morwenna parks her car. She and Adrian walk across the grass to the stalls, Adrian one step behind.

"Now, you stay with me, young Adrian," she says. "I *am* responsible for you. Your Mum doesn't know you're here."

"I can look after myself."

"You say."

"You're being bloody bossy." Adrian pouts.

Morwenna stops, turns, extends a finger. "Look, Adrian. You're with me now. Don't make me angry."

"All right."

She takes his hand and continues walking. So embarrassing. Morwenna is treating him like a child. He's thirteen; he's not a baby anymore. He takes his hand away.

"Okay, suit yourself," she says. "But don't leave my sight."

They pass in front of one stall, a tombola. The middle-aged woman behind it says, "Hello, Morwenna! Aren't you running the shop today?"

"It's shut for the morning, Eileen," she says. "I decided. Special

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

occasion."

"Who's this young man?" says Eileen, squinting past Morwenna to Adrian.

"This is Adrian. He does my paper round. He did it in record time this morning."

"Hello," says Adrian flatly.

"Well, the BBC have arrived," Eileen adds. "Over there, by the marquee."

Morwenna looks, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand. Adrian follows her gaze. A tall black woman is speaking to Mrs. Weldon. Something about the visitor fascinates him: the expensive suit, the twitchy manner. A city dweller, not at ease in the country. You don't see many black faces in Trezillan.

"That's Diana Mathis," says Eileen.

"She looks prettier than she does on telly," says Morwenna. "Come on, Adrian, let's get a bit nearer. We might get our faces on the news."

Over by the marquee, Diana tells Tom: "We'll get a few overviews of the crowd. If we can interview you, Mrs. Weldon — "

"Call me Margaret. Certainly."

"We can do that any time. I'd like to talk to some of those people out there."

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

"And one of the k — children, too. That'd add a nice touch."

"That won't be any problem."

"We won't get in anyone's way."

THE ECLIPSE reaches fifty percent partial, and more; the Sun has become an increasingly thinning crescent. The sky over Cornwall has darkened, and will darken still more as totality approaches. The temperature has dropped; birds stop their wheeling in the sky and fly to their evening perches. Noisy children become quiet and still.

As he talks to Mary Beth, Clive senses that for once, their bodies do not matter. Masculinity and femininity no longer apply, no longer inhibit. A pure meeting of minds, and at last his body can be ignored: the rough stubble,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the expanding waistline, the thinning hair. He imagines his body hair melting away, his penis shrinking inward; her breasts reabsorbed into her body, her vagina closing up. But he opens his eyes again, and difference is still apparent: the swell of her breasts and hips, the white ridge of her bra through her T-shirt. The ground is still hard on his buttocks. The body can't be wholly ignored.

Although he has a lover of two years' standing, sex for him has always mattered less than companionship. He knows not everyone shares his view: certain past lovers certainly didn't. But companionship is what he has, if only briefly, with this young American woman, and sexuality cannot muddle the equation. But he won't see her again after today; before long she'll be halfway across the globe, in another continent. He can buy her lunch, back in Penzance; perhaps they'll exchange addresses. Perhaps.

Near to them, a small black and white portable TV is sitting on the grass, a lead running back between the gravestones and over the wall to a nearby car engine. Clive hasn't paid much attention to it, but occasionally lets himself be distracted by it. He watches an interview with a German man talking about how he was at the '91 Pacific eclipse and the '94 South American amongst others; how he does not tire of watching eclipses and how everyone should witness one at least once in their lives — it's a religious experience.

Clive nudges Mary Beth's elbow and points at the TV set. *That's what it's like for me,* he thinks, *something like that.* Mary Beth looks up at him and smiles warmly.

Clive takes another swig of cider. He remembers when he was Mary Beth's age, when he'd be sitting somewhere like this of a weekend, a man beside him, slipping slowly into an amiable tipsiness. Alcohol always makes him expansive, and in an excess of goodwill he slips his arm about Mary Beth's shoulders. Normally such a gesture would horrify him: in the past, before public attitudes eased, he wanted to publicly embrace his lover, kiss him, the way he'd seen heterosexual couples do, but he knew full well he couldn't. But she doesn't resist, accepts his gesture with utter calmness, moves in to the circle of his arm.

Mary Beth is not surprised when Clive rests his arm on her shoulders; it's a natural consequence of the ease of their acquaintance. She's grown fond of him, as if he were a favorite uncle. She'll stay with him today for as long as she can: she'd prefer that to exploring St. Just, Penzance, Land's End on her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

own. Perhaps they'll keep in touch; already she regards him as a friend.

"And now over live to Diana Mathis in Cornwall."

"Thank you, Michael. Well, I'm here at Trezillan village green, and we're not far from totality now. Adrian — " and she turns to a young boy, nearest the camera — "isn't this an exciting event?"

The camera moves in to a close-up of the boy, who is in his early teens. Clive doesn't hear what the boy says, and only marginally registers his strong Cornish accent. *I must have been like that, years ago,* he thinks. *In my case, the Moon landings; in his case, this. He'll never forget this day. He hasn't become cynical, not like me, not like that reporter. She's seen it all, possibly seen too much. So she doesn't see anything at all. Tomorrow she'll be interviewing an old lady who's rescued a cat. It's all one long blur of news. Other people's lives don't impact on her outside her own little circle, nor on me. But at least I'm aware of it. But I don't know quite what to do about it.*

The sky is darkening, as the sun is reduced to a thin tiara round the black disc of the moon. The seagulls are silent, mistaking the darkness for night. In St. Just there is no activity now: cars have stopped on the main road, even in the village center, and the drivers are looking out of their windows at the sun. Totality is very near. Mary Beth leans forward, puts her sweatshirt back on, settles back into the crook of Clive's arm.

"It's a beautiful sight," she says.

"I'm glad it's come out this way," says Clive. He has taken out his camera now; it rests on his lap, ready. "What a disappointment if we couldn't see the Sun. If it were overcast.'

"The sky'd still go dark."

"But it wouldn't be the same."

Mary Beth looks up again. The Sun is a fingernail-paring now, slipping inexorably into total eclipse.

"There it goes," a man somewhere in the crowd shouts out.

At the very last moment, the Sun flares in a brilliant point of light at the edge of the Moon. The diamond-ring effect, the last stage before second contact. When the Sun disappears the crowd cheers and applauds.

"Make a wish," Clive mutters in her ear.

Mary Beth does.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Total eclipse. Portent of millennial disaster, or the time when, as they say, in its special darkness you can see yourself more clearly? As thousands of people in Cornwall, and millions more live on television, watch, at 11:10 British Summer Time Total Eclipse 1999 begins.

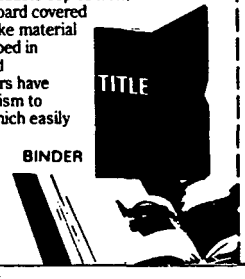
The sky is night-dark, and there are stars. Venus, Jupiter, and Mercury are visible, their positions carefully noted by the astronomers present. The Moon is unyielding black, a hole in the sky. Around it is the opalescent ring of the solar corona, rippling like a net curtain. A red-orange prominence spark-spits out into space. Another curls round and joins itself: the hole formed is large enough to contain the Earth. A minute passes; two. For the two minutes and twenty-three seconds of totality cameras click and whirr. People look up, holding hands in silence. And then a point of brilliant light bursts out at the side of the Moon, and grows brighter. Third contact. The corona is no longer visible, and the stars have gone out. Already the sky is lightening.

It is over. It is not Judgment Day.

ORGANIZE AND PROTECT YOUR COPIES OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction

Custom-made titled cases and binders, designed to hold a year's issues, provide the storage system to help protect your valuable copies from damage. Reinforced board covered with durable leather-like material in red, title hot-stamped in gold, cases V-notched for easy access, binders have special spring mechanism to hold individual rods which easily snap in.

Cases: 1—$ 7.95
3—$21.95
6—$39.95
Binders: 1—$ 9.95
3—$27.95
6—$52.95



Fantasy & Science Fiction
Jesse Jones Industries, Dept. F&SF
499 East Erie Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19134

Enclosed is $_____ for _____ Cases; _____ Binders. Add $1 per case/binder for postage & handling. Outside USA $2.50 per case/binder (US funds only). PA residents add 6% sales tax.

Print
Name_____

Address_____
No P O Box Numbers Please

City_____

State/Zip_____

CHARGE ORDERS (Minimum $15): Am Ex, Visa, MC, DC accepted. Send card name, #, Exp. date.

CALL TOLL FREE 7 days, 24 hours
1-800-825-6690

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

SPIRES ON THE SKYLINE

BROADCAST towers are perhaps the single most obvious technological article of modern life. At a naive glance, they seem to exist entirely for their own sake. Nobody lives in them. There's nothing stored in them, and they don't offer shelter to anyone or anything. They're skeletal, forbidding structures that are extremely tall and look quite dangerous. They stand, usually, on the highest ground available, so they're pretty hard not to notice. What's more, they're brightly painted and/or covered with flashing lights.

And then there are those *things* attached to them. Antennas of some kind, presumably, but they're nothing like the normal, everyday receiving antennas you might have at home: a simple telescoping rod for a radio, a pair of rabbit ears for a TV. These elaborate, otherworldly appurtenances resemble big drums, or sea urchin spines, or antlers.

In this column, we're going to demystify broadcast towers, and talk about what they do, and why they look that way, and how they've earned their peculiar right to loom eerily on the skyline of every urban center in America.

We begin with the electromagnetic spectrum. Towers have everything to do with the electromagnetic spectrum. Basically, they colonize the spectrum. They legally settle various patches of it, and they use their homestead in the spectrum to make money for their owners and users.

The electromagnetic spectrum is an important natural resource. Unlike most things we think of as "resources," the spectrum is immaterial and intangible. Odder still, it is limited, and yet, it is not exhaustible. Usage of the spectrum is controlled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worldwide by an international body known as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and controlled within the United States by an agency called the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Electromagnetic radiation comes in a wide variety of flavors. It's usually discussed in terms of frequency and wavelength, which are interchangeable terms. All electromagnetic radiation moves at one uniform speed, the speed of light. If the frequency of the wave is higher, then the length of the wave must by necessity become shorter.

Waves are measured in hertz. One hertz is one cycle of frequency per second, named after Heinrich Hertz, a nineteenth-century German physicist who was the first in history to deliberately send a radio signal.

The International Telecommunications Union determines the legally possible uses of the spectrum from 9,000 hertz (9 kilohertz) to 400,000,000,000 hertz (400 gigahertz). This vast legal domain extends from extremely low frequency radio waves up to extremely high frequency microwaves. The behavior of electromagnetic radiation varies considerably along this great expanse of frequency. As frequency rises, the reach of the signal deteriorates; the signal travels less easily, and is more easily absorbed and scattered by rain, clouds, and foliage.

After electromagnetic radiation leaves the legal domain of the ITU, its behavior becomes even more remarkable, as it segues into infrared, then visible light, then ultraviolet, Xrays, gamma rays, and cosmic rays.

From the point of view of physics, there's a strangely arbitrary quality to the political decisions of the ITU. For instance, it would seem very odd if there were an international regulatory body deciding who could license and use the color red. Visible colors are a form of electromagnetism, just like radio and microwaves. "Red" is a small piece of the electromagnetic spectrum which happens to be perceivable by the human eye, and yet it would seem shocking if somebody claimed exclusive use of that frequency. The spectrum really isn't a "territory" at all, and can't really be "owned," even though it can be, and is, literally auctioned off to private bidders by national governments for very large sums. Politics and commerce don't matter to the photons. But they matter plenty to the people who build and use towers.

The ITU holds regular international meetings, the World Administrative Radio Conferences, in which various national players jostle over

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spectrum usage. This is an odd and little recognized species of diplomacy, but the United States takes it with utter seriousness, as do other countries. The resultant official protocols of global spectrum usage closely resemble international trade documents, or maybe income tax law. They are very arcane, very specific, and absolutely riddled with archaisms, loopholes, local exceptions and complex wheeler-dealings that go back decades. Everybody and his brother has some toehold in the spectrum: ship navigation, aircraft navigation, standard time signals, various amateur ham radio bands, industrial remote-control radio bands, ship-to-shore telephony, microwave telephone relays, military and civilian radars, police radio dispatch, radio astronomy, satellite frequencies, kids' radio-controlled toys, garage-door openers, and on and on.

The spectrum has been getting steadily more crowded for decades. Once a broad and lonely frontier, inhabited mostly by nutty entrepreneurs and kids with crystal sets, it is now a thriving, uncomfortably crowded metropolis. In the past twenty years especially, there has been phenomenal growth in the number of machines spewing radio and microwave signals into space. New services keep springing up: telephones in airplanes, wireless electronic mail, mobile telephones, "personal communication systems," all of them fiercely demanding elbow room.

AM radio, FM radio, and television all have slices of the spectrum. They stake and hold their claim with towers. Towers have evolved to fit their specialized environment: a complex interplay of financial necessity, the laws of physics, and government regulation.

Towers could easily be a lot bigger than they are. They're made of sturdy galvanized steel, and the principles of their construction are well-understood. Given four million dollars, it would be a fairly simple matter to build a broadcast tower 4,000 feet high. In practice, however, you won't see towers much over 2,100 feet in the United States, because the FCC deliberately stunts them. A broadcast antenna atop a 4,000-foot tower would hog the spectrum over too large a geographical area.

Almost every large urban antenna-tower, the kind you might see in everyday life, belongs to some commercial entity. Military and scientific research antennas are more discreet, usually located in remote enclaves. Furthermore, they just don't look like commercial antennas. Military communication equipment is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not subject to commercial restraints and has a characteristic appearance: rugged, heavy-duty, clunky, serial-numbered, basically Soviet-looking. Scientific instruments are designed to gather data with an accuracy to the last possible decimal point. They may look frazzled, but they rarely look simple. Broadcast tower equipment by contrast is designed to make money, so it looks cheerfully slimmed down and mass-produced and gimcrack.

Of course, a commercial antenna must obey the laws of physics like other antennas, and has been designed to do that, but its true primary function is generating optimal revenue on capital investment. Towers and their antennas cost as little as possible, consonant with optimal coverage of the market area, and the likelihood of avoiding federal prosecution for sloppy practices. Modern antennas are becoming steadily more elaborate, so as to use thinner slices of spectrum and waste less radiative power. More elaborate design also reduces the annoyance of stray, unwanted signals, so-called "electromagnetic pollution."

Towers fall under the aegis of not one but two powerful bureaucracies, the FCC and the FAA, or Federal Aviation Administration. The FAA is enormously fond of massive air-traffic radar antennas, but dourly regards broadcast antennas as a "menace to air navigation." This is the main reason why towers are so flauntingly obvious: If towers were painted sky blue they'd be almost invisible, but they're not allowed this. Towers are hazards to the skyways, and therefore they are striped in glaring "aviation white" and gruesome "international orange" as if they were big traffic sawhorses.

Both the FCC and FAA are big outfits that have been around quite a while. They may be slow and cumbersome, but they pretty well know the name of the game. Safety failures in tower management can draw savage fines of up to a hundred thousand dollars a day. FCC regional offices have mandatory tower inspection quotas, and worse yet, the fines on offenders go tidily right into the FCC's budget.

That orange and white paint costs a lot. It also peels off every couple of years, and has to be replaced, by hand. Depending on the size of the tower, it's sometimes possible to get away with using navigation hazard lights instead of paint, especially if the lights strobe. The size of the lights, and their distribution on the tower structure, and their wattage, and even their rate and method of flashing are all spelled out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in grinding detail by the FCC and FAA.

In the real world — and commercial towers are very real-world structures — lights aren't that much of an advantage over paint. The bulbs burn out, for one thing. Rain shorts out the line. Ice freezes solid on the high upper reaches of the tower, plummets off in big thirty-pound chunks, cracking the lights off (not to mention cracking the lower-mounted antennas, the hoods and windshields of utility trucks, and the skulls of unlucky technicians). The lights' power sometimes fails entirely.

And people shoot the lights and steal them. In the real world, people shoot towers all the time. Something about towers — their dominating size, their lonely locales, or maybe it's that color scheme and that pesky blinking — seems to provoke an element of trigger-happy lunacy in certain people. Bullet damage is a major hassle for the tower owner and renter.

People, especially drunken undergraduates in college towns, often climb the towers and steal the hazard lights as trophies. If you visit the base of a tower, you will usually find it surrounded with eight-foot, padlocked galvanized fencing and a mean coil of sharp razor-wire. But that won't stop an active guy with a pickup, a ladder, and a six-pack under his belt.

The people who physically build and maintain towers refer to themselves as "tower hands." Tower engineers and designers refer to these people as "riggers." The suit-and-tie folks who actually own broadcasting stations refer to them as "tower monkeys." Tower hands are blue-collar industrial workers, mostly agile young men, mostly non-unionized. They're a special breed. Not everybody can calmly climb 2,000 feet into the air with a twenty-pound tool-belt of ohmmeters, wattmeters, voltage meters, and various wrenches, clamps, screwdrivers, and specialized cutting tools. Some people get used to this and come to enjoy it, but those who don't get used to it *never* get used to it.

While 2,000 feet in the air, these unsung knights of the airwaves must juggle large, unwieldy antennas. Quite often they work when the station is off the air — in the midnight darkness, using helmet-mounted coal-miners' lamps. And it's hot up there on the tower, or freezing, or wet, and almost always windy.

The commonest task in the tower hand's life is painting. It's done with "paint-mitts," big soppy gloves dipped in paint, which are stroked over every structural element in the tower, rather like grooming a horse. It takes a strong man a full day to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

paint a hundred feet of an average tower. (Rip-off hustlers posing as tower hands can paint towers at "bargain rates" with amazing cheapness and speed. The rascals — and there are some in every business — paint only the *underside* of the tower, the parts visible from the ground.)

Spray-on paint can be faster than hand-work, but with even the least breeze, paint sprayed 2,000 feet up will carry hundreds of yards to splatter the roofs, walls, and cars of angry civilians with vivid "international orange." There simply isn't much calm air 2,000 feet up in the sky. High-altitude wind doesn't have to deal with ground-level friction, so wind-speed roughly doubles about every thousand feet.

Building towers is known in the trade as "stacking steel." The towers are shipped in pieces, then bolted or welded into segments, either on-site or at the shop. The rigid sections are hauled skyward with a winch-driven "load line," and kept from swaying by a second steel cable, the "tagline." Each section is bootstrapped up above the top of the tower, through the use of a tower-mounted crane, called the "gin pole." The gin pole has a 360-degree revolving device at its very top, the "rooster head." Each new section is deliberately hauled up, spun deftly around on the rooster head, stacked on top of all the previous sections, and securely bolted into place. Then the tower hands detach the gin pole, climb the section they just stacked, mount the gin pole up at the top again, and repeat the process till they're done.

Tower construction is a mature industry; there have not been many innovations in the last forty years. There's nothing new about galvanized steel; it's not high-tech, but it's plenty sturdy, it's easy to work and weld, and it gets the job done. The job's not cheap. In today's market, galvanized steel towers tend to cost about a million dollars per thousand feet of height.

Towers come in two basic varieties, self-supporting and guyed. The self-supporting towers are heavier and more expensive, their feet broadly splayed across the earth. Despite their slender spires, the guyed towers actually require more room. The bottom of a guyed tower is tapered and quite slender, often a narrow patch of industrial steel not much bigger than the top of a child's school-desk. But the foundations for those guy cables stretch out over a vast area, sometimes 100 percent of the tower's height, in three or four different directions. It's possible to draw the cables in toward the tower's base, but that increases the "download" on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the tower structure.

Towers are generally built as lightly as possible, commensurate with the strain involved. But the strain is very considerable. Towers themselves are heavy. They need to be sturdy enough to have tower hands climbing any part of them, at any time, safely.

Small towers sometimes use their bracing bars as natural step-ladders, but big towers have a further burden. It takes a strong man, with a clear head, three fourths of an hour to climb a thousand feet, so any tower over that size definitely requires an elevator. That brings the full elaborate rigging of guide rails, driving mechanism, hoisting cables, counterweights, rope guards, and cab controls, all of which add to the weight and strain on the structure. Even with an elevator, one still needs a ladder for detail work. Tower hands, who have a very good head for heights, prefer their ladders out on the open air, where there are fewer encumbrances, and they can get the job done in short order. However, station engineers and station personnel, who sometimes need to whip up the tower to replace a light bulb or such, prefer a ladder that's nestled inside the tower, so the structure itself forms a natural safety cage.

Besides the weight of the tower, its elevator, the power cables, the waveguides, the lights, and the antennas, there is also the grave risk of ice. Ice forms very easily on towers, much like the icing of an aircraft wing. An ice storm can add hugely to a tower's weight, and towers must be designed for that eventuality.

Lightning is another prominent hazard, and although towers are well grounded, lighting can be freakish and often destroys vulnerable antennas and wiring.

But the single greatest threat to a tower is wind-load. Wind has the advantage of leverage; it can attack a tower from any direction, anywhere along its length, and can twist it, bend it, shake it, pound it, and build up destructive resonant vibrations.

Towers and their antennas are built to avoid resisting wind. The structural elements are streamlined. Often the antennas have radomes, plastic weatherproof covers of various shapes. The plastic radome is transparent to radio and microwave emissions; it protects the sensitive antenna and also streamlines it to avoid wind-load.

An antenna is an interface between an electrical system and the complex surrounding world of moving electromagnetic fields. Antennas come in a bewildering variety of shapes, sizes, and functions. The An-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drew Corporation, prominent American tower builder and equipment specialist, sells over six hundred different models of antennas.

Antennas are classified in four basic varieties: current elements, traveling-wave antennas, antenna arrays, and radiating-aperture antennas. Elemental antennas tend to be low in the frequency range, traveling-wave antennas rather higher, arrays a bit higher yet, and aperture antennas deal with high-frequency microwaves. Antennas are designed to meet certain performance parameters: frequency, radiation pattern, gain, impedance, bandwidth, polarization, and noise temperature.

Elemental antennas are not very "elemental." They were pretty elemental back in the days of Guglielmo Marconi, the first to make any money broadcasting, but Marconi's radiant day of glory was in 1901, and his field of "Marconi wireless" has enjoyed most of a long century of brilliant innovation and sustained development. Monopole antennas are pretty elemental — just a big metal rod, spewing out radiation in all directions — but they quickly grow more elaborate. There are doublets and dipoles and loops; slots, stubs, rods, whips; biconal antennas, spheroidal antennas, microstrip radiators.

Then there's the traveling-wave antennas: rhombic, slotted waveguides, spirals, helices, slow wave, fast wave, leaky wave.

And the arrays: broadside, endfire, planar, circular, multiplicative, beacon, et al.

And aperture variants: the extensive microwave clan. The reflector family: single, dual, paraboloid, spherical, cylindrical, off-set, multibeam, contoured, hybrid, tracking.... The horn family: pyramidal, sectoral, conical, biconical, box, hybrid, ridged. The lens family: metal lens, dielectric lens, Luneberg lens. Plus backfire aperture, short dielectric rods, and parabolic horns.

Electromagnetism is a difficult phenomenon. The behavior of photons doesn't make much horse sense, and is highly counterintuitive. Even the bedrock of electromagnetic understanding, Maxwell's equations, requires one to break into specialized notation, and the integral calculus follows with dreadful speed. To put it very simply: antennas come in different shapes and sizes because they are sending signals of different quality, in fields of different three-dimensional shape.

Wavelength is the most important determinant of antenna size. Low frequency radiation has a very long wavelength and works best with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

very long antenna. AM broadcasting is low frequency, and in AM broadcasting the tower *is* the antenna. The AM tower itself is mounted on a block of insulation. Power is pumped into the entire tower and the whole shebang radiates. These low-frequency radio waves can bounce off the ionosphere and go amazing distances.

Microwaves, however, are much farther up the spectrum. Microwave radiation has a short wavelength and behaves more like light. This is why microwave antennas come as lenses and dishes, rather like the lens and retina of a human eye.

An array antenna is a group of antennas which interreact in complex fashion, bouncing and shaping the radiation they emit. The upshot is a directional beam.

"Coverage is coverage," as the tower hands say, so very often several different companies, or even several different industries, will share towers, bolting their equipment up and down the structure, rather like oysters, limpets, and barnacles all settling on the same reef.

Here's a brief naturalist's description of some of the mechanical organisms one is likely to see on a broadcast tower:

First — the largest and most obvious — are things that look like big drums. These are microwave dishes under their protective membranes of radome. They may be flat on both sides, in which case they are probably two parabolic dishes mounted back-to-back. They may be flat on one side, or they may bulge out on both sides so that they resemble a flying saucer. If they are mounted so that the dish faces out horizontally, then they are relays of some kind, perhaps local telephone or a microwave long-distance service. They might be a microwave television feed to a broadcast TV network affiliate, or a local cable TV system. They don't broadcast for public reception, because the microwave beams from these focused dishes are very narrow. Somewhere in the distance, probably within thirty miles, is another relay in the chain.

A tower may well have several satellite microwave dishes. These will be down near the base of the tower, hooked to the tower by cable and pointed almost straight up. These satellite dishes are generally much bigger than relay microwave dishes. They're too big to fit on a tower, and there's no real reason to put them on a tower anyway; they'll scarcely get much closer to an orbiting satellite by rising a mere 2,000 feet.

Often, small microwave dishes made of metal slats are mounted to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the side of the tower. These slat dishes are mostly empty space, so they're less electronically efficient than a smooth metal dish would be. However, a smooth metal dish, being cupshaped, acts just like the cup on a wind-gauge, so if a strong wind gust hits it, it will strain the tower violently. Slotted dishes are lighter, cheaper, and safer.

Then there are horns. Horns are also microwave emitters. Horns have a thick, hollow tube called a wave guide at the bottom. The waveguide supplies the microwave radiation through a hollow metallic pipe, and the horn reflects this blast of microwave radiation off an interior reflector, into a narrow beam of the proper "phase," "aperture," and "directivity." Horn antennas are narrow at the bottom and spread out at the top, like acoustic horns. Some are conical, others rectangular. They tend to be mounted vertically inside the tower structure. The "noise" of the horn comes out the side of the horn, not its end, however.

One may see a number of white poles, mounted vertically, spaced parallel and rather far apart, attached to the tower but well away from it. On big towers, these poles might be halfway up; on shorter towers, they're at the top. Sometimes the vertical poles are mounted on the rim of a square or triangular platform, with catwalks for easy access by tower hands. These are antennas for land mobile radio services: paging, cellular phones, cab dispatch, and express mail services.

The tops of towers may well be thick, pipelike, featureless cylinders. These are generally TV broadcast antennas encased in a long cylindrical radome, and topped off with an aircraft beacon.

Very odd things grow from the sides of towers. One sometimes sees a tall vertically mounted rack of metal curlicues that look like a stack of omega signs. These are tubular ring antennas with one knobby stub pointing upward, one stub downward, in an array of up to sixteen. These are FM radio transmitters.

Another array of flat metal rings is linked lengthwise by two long parallel rods. These are VHF television broadcast antennas.

Another species of FM antenna is particularly odd. These witchy-looking arrays stand well out from the side of the tower, on a rod with two large, V-shaped pairs of arms. One V is out at the end of the rod, canted backward, and the other is near the butt of the rod, canted forward. The two V's are twisted at angles to one another, so that from the ground the ends of the V's appear

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to overlap slightly, forming a broken square. The arms are of hollow brass tubing, and they come in long sets down the side of the tower. The whole array resembles a line of children's jacks that have all been violently stepped on.

The four arms of each antenna are quarter-wavelength arms, two driven and two parasitic, so that their FM radiation is in ninety-degree quadrature with equal amplitudes and a high aperture efficiency. Of course, that's easy for *you* to say...

In years to come, the ecology of towers will probably change greatly. This is due to the weird phenomenon known as the "Great Media Exchange" or the "Negroponte Flip," after MIT media theorist Nicholas Negroponte. Broadcast services such as television are going into wired distribution by cable television, where a single "broadcast" can reach sixty percent of the American population and even reach far overseas. With a combination of cable television in cities and direct satellite broadcast rurally, what real need remains for television towers? In the meantime, however, services formerly transferred exclusively by wire, such as telephone and fax, are going into wireless, cellular, portable applications, supported by an infrastructure of small neighborhood towers and rather modestly sized antennas.

Antennas have a glowing future. The spectrum can only become more crowded, and the design of antennas can only become more sophisticated. It may well be, though, that another couple of decades will reduce the great steel spires of the skyline to relics. We have seen them every day of our lives, grown up with them as constant looming presences. But despite their steel and their size, their role in society may prove no more permanent than that of windmills or lighthouses. If we do lose them to the impetus of progress, our grandchildren will regard these great towers with a mixture of romance and incredulity, as the largest and most garish technological anomalies that the twentieth century ever produced.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

James Morrow's most recent novel, Only Begotten Daughter, *won the World Fantasy Award for best novel. He has also won two Nebulas for his short fiction, most recently in 1993 for his novella,* City of Truth. *HBJ will publish his next novel,* Towing Jehovah *sometime this spring.*

"Director's Cut" is a deleted section from that novel. James writes, "Echoes of 'Director's Cut' survive here and there in the [novel] manuscript, but the narrative structure could not accomodate a complete, autonomous one-act play. And so, rather poetically, this play about 'missing scenes' is itself a missing scene." We are lucky to have it in our pages.

Director's Cut

By James Morrow

THE CURTAIN RISES ON THE prophet MOSES, caught in the glow of a spotlight and sitting atop a mound of Dead Sea sand. The famous Tablets of the Law stick out of the dune like ears on a Mickey Mouse cap. A large rear-projection video screen is suspended over Moses's head. An off-stage INTERVIEWER addresses the patriarch.

INTERVIEWER. I'll never forget. Who could forget? There I am, only nine years old, and Mom and Dad take me to see Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*...

MOSES. A terrific picture, Marty, don't you think?

INTERVIEWER. It sure impressed me as a kid. Today...well, it seems a bit hokey.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MOSES. Hokey? *Hokey?* That DeMille was a genius, Marty, a certifiable *genius.*

INTERVIEWER. Is it true his original cut ran over seven hours?

MOSES. Yep. Of course, no theater chain was willing to book the thing. You'd have had to serve dinner in the middle, like on a flight from London to Tel Aviv.

INTERVIEWER. It's rumored some of the original rushes are in your possession.

MOSES. No way, Marty. You pull papyrus out by the roots and — bang — it disintegrates in a few days.

INTERVIEWER. I meant *movie* rushes.

MOSES. *(laughs and slaps his knee)* I know you did — gotcha! *(holds up fistful of motion picture film)* Over the past forty years, I've managed to collect bits and pieces from nearly every missing scene.

INTERVIEWER. For example?

MOSES. The Plagues of Egypt. The release prints included blood, darkness, and hail...

An excerpt from The Ten Commandments *appears on the video screen: fiery hail clattering across the balcony of Pharaoh's palace.*

MOSES. But they were lacking some of the really interesting ones. You should've seen what DeMille did with frogs.

The screen displays two elderly, working-class Egyptian women, BAKETAMON and NELLIFER, potters by trade, sitting on the banks of the Nile River. As they speak, BAKETAMON fashions a canopic jar, NELLIFER a soup tureen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BAKETAMON. *(addressing interviewer)* The frogs? How could I ever forget the *frogs?*

NELLIFER. You'd open your unmentionables drawer and — pop — one of them little suckers would jump in your face.

BAKETAMON. Don't let anyone tell you God hasn't got a sense of humor.

INTERVIEWER. Which plague was the worst?

BAKETAMON. The boils, I think. My skin looked like the back of the moon.

NELLIFER. The boils, are you kidding? The locusts were far worse than the boils.

BAKETAMON. The mosquitoes were pretty nasty too.

NELLIFER. And the flies.

BAKETAMON. And the cattle getting murrain.

NELLIFER. And the death of the firstborn. A lot of people *hated* that one.

BAKETAMON. Of course, it didn't touch Nelli and me.

NELLIFER. We were lucky. Our firstborns were already dead.

BAKETAMON. Mine died in the hail.

INTERVIEWER. Froze?

BAKETAMON. Beaned.

NELLIFER. Mine had been suffering from chronic diarrhea since he was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a month old, so when the waters became blood — zap, kid got dehydrated.

BAKETAMON. Nelli, your mind's going. It was your *second*born who died when the waters became blood. Your *first*born died in the darkness, when he accidentally drank that turpentine.

NELLIFER. No, my *second*born died much later, drowned when the Red Sea rolled back into its bed. My *third*born drank the turpentine. A mother remembers these things.

INTERVIEWER. I was certain you'd be more bitter about your ordeals.

NELLIFER. Initially we thought the plagues were unjust. We even wrote a book about it.

BAKETAMON. *When Bad Things Happen to Good Pagans.*

NELLIFER. Then we came to understand our innate depravity and intrinsic wickedness.

BAKETAMON. There's only one good Person in the whole universe, and that's the Lord God Jehovah.

NELLIFER. Next to Him, we're a couple of slime molds.

INTERVIEWER. Sounds like you've converted to monotheism.

BAKETAMON. *(nodding)* We love the Lord our God with all our heart.

NELLIFER. And all our soul.

BAKETAMON. And all our might.

NELLIFER. Besides, there's no telling what He might do to us next.

BAKETAMON. Fire ants, possibly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NELLIFER. Killer bees.

BAKETAMON. Scarlet fever.

NELLIFER. I got two sons left.

BAKETAMON. I'm still up a daughter.

NELLIFER. The Lord giveth.

BAKETAMON. And the Lord taketh away.

NELLIFER. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

The screen goes blank.

INTERVIEWER. When you went up on Mount Sinai, Jehovah offered you a lot more than the Decalogue.

MOSES. *(displays excised footage)* DeMille shot everything, all six hundred and twelve laws. First to go were the prescriptions concerning slavery — the protocols for selling your daughter and so on. Unfortunately, those cuts reduced the running time a mere eight minutes.

An excerpt from The Ten Commandments *appears on the screen: God's animated forefinger etching the Decalogue onto the face of Sinai, while Charlton Heston watches with a mixture of awe, fascination, and incredulity. As the last rule is carved — THOU SHALT NOT COVET — the frame suddenly freezes.*

GOD. *(voice-over)* Now for the details. *(beat)* When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your power, if you see a beautiful woman among the prisoners and find her desirable, you may make her your wife.

INTERVIEWER. I have to admire DeMille for using something like that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Deuteronomy 21:10, right?

MOSES. He was a much gutsier filmmaker than his detractors imagine.

GOD. *(voice-over)* When two men are fighting together, if the wife of one intervenes to protect her husband by putting out her hand and seizing the other by the private parts, you shall cut off her hand and show no pity.

INTERVIEWER. Private parts? DeMille used *that?*

MOSES. Deuteronomy 25:11.

GOD. *(voice-over)* If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, his father and mother shall bring him out to the elders of the town, and all his fellow citizens shall stone the son to death.

MOSES. Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

INTERVIEWER. And here I'd always thought DeMille was afraid of controversy.

MOSES. One ballsy mogul, Marty.

The screen goes blank.

INTERVIEWER. After the giving of the Law, *The Ten Commandments* jumps rather abruptly to the Children of Israel entering the Promised Land.

MOSES. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and poor DeMille had to edit out thirty-nine of them. The entire Book of Numbers ended up on the cutting room floor.

INTERVIEWER. He actually filmed those episodes?

MOSES. *(nodding)* The Lord giving my sister leprosy, causing the earth to swallow up Dathan, striking down the Israelites who disparaged Canaan,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

firebombing the ones who complained at Hormah, sending serpents against those who grumbled on the road from Mount Hor, visiting a plague on everybody who backslid at Peor...

INTERVIEWER. Damn theater chains. They think they own the world.

MOSES. I especially hated to lose that stirring speech I made to my generals following the subjugation of the Midianites.

INTERVIEWER. Would you like to deliver it now, for the record?

MOSES. Sure would, Marty. Ready? Here goes. Numbers 31:15-18. *(clears throat)* "Why have you spared the life of all the women? These were the very ones who perverted the sons of Israel! Kill all the male children! Kill also all the women who have slept with a man! Spare the lives only of the young girls who have not slept with a man, and take them for yourselves!"

INTERVIEWER. Do you suppose we'll ever see the version of *The Ten Commandments* that Mr. DeMille intended?

MOSES. Only yesterday I was talking to some nice folks down at the National Endowment for the Arts. They're willing to kick in three million for a restoration.

INTERVIEWER. A worthy cause.

MOSES. The worthiest, Marty. Believe me, there's justice in this old world. You simply have to wait for it.

Curtain.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We continue our look at deities and myth with Esther M. Friesner's "Two Lovers, Two Gods, and a Fable."

In addition to the stories Esther has in our inventory (including an upcoming cover story), she has several new novels on the stands. First is a fantasy trilogy from Ace Books, Majyk by Accident *(published in 1993),* Majyk by Hook or Crook, *and* Majyk by Design. *Atheneum has just published her hardcover young adult fantasy novel,* The Wishing Season, *and for fun, she is working on a* Star Trek: Deep Space Nine *novel,* Warchild, *which will appear in 1995.*

Two Lovers, Two Gods, and a Fable

By Esther M. Friesner

ALL RIGHT, SOME OF THE details are missing. Time has that effect on events. Where were you when you heard the report of the bullets fired from the knoll, the Book Depository, the next car back (your choice)? Ah, yes, but what were you *wearing?* What was the last meal you had eaten? Who was the last person to call you on the telephone before those shots rang out in Dallas and what the hell did he want? Not so easy now, is it? So don't give me a hard time. Just listen. Sometimes the details don't matter. This could be one of those times.

What you need to know: There were two lovers. They loved each other to the point of despair because they knew they were going to have to die some day. Those are the breaks, and the breaks always nest down in the heart. Most lovers, brought to this realization, usually are satisfied to pass on their despair through conception, but these were very perceptive people, for lovers. They knew the child they begat and birthed would not be *them.* "Accept No Substitutes!" They did not wish to live on through new life. They only wished

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to live.

What else might help you: This happened a long time ago. Where? Maybe ancient Egypt, maybe Sumer of the warring cities. I don't know. I forget. I don't care. Nobody told me. Remember what I told you about details. Or weren't you paying attention? But you also really ought to know that this did not happen so long ago that there were no gods yet. The gods were already thought of as needful. The gods were there.

What you needn't bother about: Names. Not of the lovers, not of the place where they loved, not of the gods who watched them, not of what games the gods played while they watched. Pretend the gods were throwing dice, if you feel the need to imagine them frivolously, casually occupied, one way or another. Pretend they were taking a coffee break from making and breaking worlds. That's almost as much fun as dice, and you lose less money. They took their coffee black, two sugars, and the donuts never made them gain weight.

Whatever else the gods were doing, they were listening to prayers at the same time. So now you know how really old this story is, because the gods could listen to prayers without sticking a priest in their ears and turning up the volume. It was nice to listen to prayers. It was sort of like vegging out in front of MTV. Sometimes you picked up on something pretty good.

What the gods heard:

No, wait. *What only* two *of the gods heard:*

(The others weren't paying attention. A fight had broken out in one corner of whatever place was immaterial and paradisiacal enough for divine beings to park their posteriors while at the same time being omnipresent. But they were gods, and gods are also omniscient, so they couldn't have *not* been paying attention. Wait. There's a reason behind this. Not so hard to come up with as the one I give the kids when they ask why they've got to die some day, or why good people get old and crazy-strange, or — Wait. I can justify this. I once voted for Reagan; I can justify anything.)

The reason only two of the gods heard was that the other gods weren't paying attention. They didn't need to pay attention. They already knew it all, being omniscient, but just because you know all about something doesn't mean it's going to hold your interest. The other gods heard and didn't give a damn.

There.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What the God of Sentiment and the God of Trickery heard:

"O Almighty Powers, we love each other dearly! Let us live forever!"

That was it. That was all. That was the prayer in its entirety. Concise, precise, to the point. It was a very good prayer. It doesn't matter who made it up, but my money's on the woman. It doesn't matter whether one or both of the lovers offered it to the gods, or how often. Once is all it takes, if you can get the gods to put down those stupid dice and *pay attention.*

That night, because dreams are discreet and gods loathe media attention, the God of Sentiment appeared to the lovers in a dream. This is what the God of Sentiment told them:

"It is in my heart to grant your prayer. You shall live forever. There is only one thing you must do first — "

Then the god vanished. It was most upsetting. The lovers sat bolt upright in their bed, clinging even closer to one another.

"I dreamed — "

"So did I!"

"Did you hear what — ?"

"It went unfinished."

"Was it just a dream?"

"If we sleep again, and dream the same again, and if the god completes instructing us in our task, I will believe it was true."

So the lovers urged each other back to sleep in the sweetest way either knew how, and it came to pass — which is just a polite way of saying that the god deigned to get around to it — that they were again visited in their dreams.

The image of the God of Sentiment appeared and said, "Where was I?"

The lovers replied, "You were about to let us live forever." They thought they were very smart to "forget" to mention that the god was about to lay down the price of immortality's gift.

Never play smartass with the gods. They see all, they know all, they are all things and everywhere, but they still don't understand knock-knock jokes and that makes them touchy.

"So I was," came the reply. "But so I was also about to say that *first* there was one thing you must do. Or did you 'forget'?"

The lovers looked shamefaced. "Name it, O Holy Being," they muttered, staring at their dream-toes.

"Many are the paths of immortality," the image declared. "It is not how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

long you live forever as *how* you live forever. Before I grant you your prayer, I would have you both depart from one another and search out over the whole earth to find the style of immortality that best suits your desires. For know this, O mortals: To live forever lies within your power. You didn't need to bother me about it."

And they woke up.

"Well," the woman said with a little sniff. "That was a waste of time and dreams. Depart from one another? Hunh! I don't want to be separated from you. That was the whole point." She threw her arms around her lover's neck.

But the man gently undid the chains of flesh and blood and bone. "We'd better get started," he said, getting out of bed and dressing.

"You're not going to leave me?" It started as a command, but it turned into a question. The woman was disgusted to hear how helpless and whiny she made herself sound and she resolved to kick herself in the pants as soon as someone invented them.

The man finished dressing and gave her a kiss just as soon as he had his belt tied in a way that flattered him. He cared about such things. "My beloved, be reasonable. When we have completed the god's instructions we shall have all eternity together. What are a few days apart compared to that?" And so he left her.

And so we leave them.

Twenty years later, there was a night like no other when the moon shone full and white through the pillars of a holy place. The woman sat with folded hands and bowed head at the feet of a god's image. Her eyes watched the pattern of mooncast cloud shadows slip across the shining floor. Her own shadow she did not see. She held a very sharp stick in her hands, and a slab of wood overlaid with wax.

The man entered the moonlit place from the shadows behind the god's image. His own shadow did not fall before him or behind him. He was naked. He no longer cared about things like belts. "Am I late?" he asked, folding his wings as he settled down beside her.

"I haven't been waiting for you all that long," she said, but with a skill for twisting words that let him know she had so too been waiting long and she was going to make him feel sorry for it beginning now and stopping when she got around to it.

Damn, she was good.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The first thing she noticed was the wings. "There's got to be a good story in this," she said as she stroked their leathery surface.

"It is our path to immortality," he said. "The path I have found for us. For many years I wandered the world, seeking the answer. In ruins older than time, from men and women outcast by all decent folk who fear the gods, in songs and chants and tales of history passed from the lips of one generation to the next, I burrowed like a mole away from the light of day for a single clue to the riddle of eternal life."

"Wait, wait," the woman said, making many markings, both complex and simple, on her slab of waxed wood. "Don't speak so quickly. That part about the mole — not bad. 'Ruins older than time'? I like that. I don't know what it means — how old is time, anyway? — but no one else will know either, or else they won't care, and it *sounds* as if it ought to mean something wonderful. I'll keep it."

Her lover gave her the strangest look, his eyes glowing a foggy red. "What do you have there?" he asked, pointing at the wooden slab with one livid finger.

"Our path to life eternal," she replied, proud as a new mother who had finally managed to forget how much it hurt to squeeze something so big through something so little.

The man frowned, and his black wings sagged. "You, too, drink the blood of the living? You, too, shun the light of the sun? You, too, spend your days isolated in a casing barely big enough for your body and your nights prowling for fresh prey? You, too, have forfeited your very soul as the price of immortality?"

The woman nodded.

"But if so — " The man's eyes narrowed suspiciously " — where are your wings?"

"Oh, I get around." She shrugged. "I could tell you stories. The places I've been, the horrors I've created, the wars I've caused, the heroes I've made, the kings whose swords I've broken — "

And she went on, enumerating all the marvels with which she had trafficked. There was no denying that her words had a fascinating quality. Her lover drew nearer, so that when he opened his mouth she could see that his two foremost dog-teeth were rather longer and more to the point than she remembered. An odd stain of darkest crimson shading to black had marred

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their previous whiteness, and there was a disquieting reek to his breath.

"What have you been eating?" she demanded.

"I do not eat," he said. "I drain, I devour, I wring the last vital drop from my victims. What does their misery matter, so long as they feed my unnatural life?" His wings lashed back with the resounding snap of sails caught in the storm's blast as he seized her. "Oh, beloved, it is not the same for you?"

She thought about it. "Mmmmmm?"

"Ordinary humans — common people — we are no longer like they."

"Mmmmm."

"They exist to give us nourishment, we exist to fill their sorry dreams with hints of life everlasting."

"Mmm*hmmmm*."

His scarlet eyes sparkled. "Then it is true! Although the god's word parted us, even separately we have come to find the selfsame path to immortality! It is a holy sign that we were meant to be together always. All the lonely years are past, the search is done, this pays for all."

"Oh yes!" she cried, casting herself deeper into his arms. "And after all that solitary time, you'll never know how wonderful it is for me to know I've finally found a fellow-writer!"

He thrust her clear of his winged embrace. "You mean you're not a vampire?"

From his plinth, through his image, the God of Trickery laughed.

Now this might be the place to end it, but there's more. There has to be. Or do you think the First Writer would ever let anyone else get in the Last Word, even if it was just a laugh?

"I know that voice!" she cried, shaking a fist at the image. "I should have suspected all along. You're not the one who came to us in our first dream."

"No," the image replied. "That was the God of Sentiment. He or she or it would have granted you an answer to your prayer too easily. Fortunately, he or she or it or sometimes they became distracted by something and they or he or it or The Ineffable Pronoun still hasn't gotten back to you. You should thank me. At least I know how to pay attention." The stone mouth of the image creaked and cracked and partially crumbled its way into a smile.

The vampire spread his wings and uttered an awful bellow, a bloodchilling sound that was scarcely human. "For this treachery, I will make you pay!" he cried. "I will hunt down every one of your worshippers and destroy them all.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

The touch of my teeth will turn them into my kindred, creatures of darkness everlasting. Undead, we cannot die; undying, we do not fear any god."

"Pooh," said the image, and the sun rose, turning the vampire to dust.

The woman knelt to touch the ashes of her lover. Her face was very strange and terrible to see. She used one hand to gather up the dust that had once burned her in its fire and let the fine gray powder sift down to cover the newly melted wax on her smooth wooden tablet.

Only then did she begin to write.

"What are you doing?" the image asked.

"Writing lies," she replied. "That's what I do. It took me years and years to get the knack, and more years than that to help common folk understand what I was doing. There were others before me who could make marks on clay or wax or stone that meant words, you know, but all their marks recorded were things the way they are — sums and surveys and the contents of storehouses and the dreary succession of dead kings. Mine do more."

"Yours deceive," the image said severely. "Trickery is *my* precinct. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Perhaps I would be," she said, her stylus still dancing over the wax, "if the people didn't keep feeding me for what I do. They seem to like my tricks much better than they like yours." She smiled at the stone image. "I am their promise of forever. The tales I tell linger, the marks I make remain."

"I will destroy them, marks and people too!"

"You can't destroy them all."

"Then I will destroy *you*."

"Try it. I am only the first. You will have a plague of lesser tricksters scampering over this world before you know it, making their monkey-marks and jabbering their stories and juggling their lies long after I am gone. Serve you right. Do you know, O Omniscient One, if it's done up skillfully enough, people more willingly believe one lie in pearls and purple than a host of naked truths? Fear that, for all your power."

She scribbled a few more characters, then set her stylus and her tablet down at the foot of the god's image. "There," she said, and with a sigh her own sustaining lies left her body and she, too, crumpled into dust.

The dust of lover and beloved filled the chasms that the woman had scrawled across the wax. The God of Trickery stepped out of his image, down from his plinth, and tried to make heads or tails out of the strange scratchings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He could not. He lost his temper and tried to break the waxed tablet against the plinth of his image. Fragile wood and wax shattered the carved stone into a mound of gravel. The image teetered and tottered and hit the floor *kerbingo!*

Or maybe just *wham!*

The God of Trickery called all the other gods to come and help him with this puzzle. They came at once — the ones who were paying attention. He told them the tale and showed them the tablet. ("You know, I *thought* I had some unfinished business around these parts," the God of Sentiment remarked.) None of them could fathom it any better than he. Some of them got quite snide about the whole affair. Names were called. Personal remarks were made. Several fist fights got started, and one match of kick-boxing. Then someone broke out the thunderbolts and locusts, someone else (who should have known better) cracked open a family-sized Box O' Cataclysms, and for awhile it was anybody's universe.

And when at last the gods departed — leaving behind them the ruined image and the ruined shrine and more than a few surviving mortals who decided to eat this week's sacrifice themselves if the gods were going to behave like that, so there — the tablet was still intact beneath the rubble.

The gods didn't do as well. Stay tuned.

Years passed. Ages rolled along. Aeons played Dogpile-on-the-Tablet. It got late. The victims of the First Vampire who didn't die of his bite went on to become vampires in their own right. It wasn't a bad way to make a living, if you didn't mind a little blood. The victims — I mean the happy happy, *happy* audience of the First Writer decided that they could make up pretty lies for profit too. It wasn't a bad way to make a living, if you didn't mind —

What you suspected would happen: Someone finally unearthed the First Writer's tablet, covered with the mingled dust of the lovers' crumpled bodies. He took a deep breath and the mingled dust went right up his nose and the next thing you know, he was sneezing sonnets.

Uh-uh.

What you might like to have happen: The tablet was at last uncovered by a sensitive soul who had no trouble whatever translating what the First Writer had written thereon. The sentiments were so powerful and moving that the reader thereof was moved to tears. These fell on the mingled dust and the lovers were at once resurrected, restored, and reunited. Today she writes screenplays and he's doing cool things with a zydeco band.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mmmmmmmnope.

What you might like to have happen if you are of a fashionably ironic bent of mind, or a writer: The tablet stayed where it was for about a week. Then there was an earthquake. Then a dog came by and did something nasty on it. This fell on the mingled dust and the lovers were at once resurrected, restored, and reunited, except when they looked around they discovered that they were a little *too* reunited. Instead of coming back as two separate and distinct individuals, they'd sprung back to life as only one person because if you mix dehydrated writer with instant vampire and dognasty you wind up with the First Critic.

Look, I'm sorry if you didn't like what they wrote about your last book, okay?

What did happen: I found the tablet. It was in my Aunt Valerie's basement all the time. (That woman never throws anything out. Who puts strings of pink, light-up piggies on their Christmas tree anyway?) I can tell you what it said. It was all about where the gods came from and how they built the universe and the straight dope on things cosmological. It had the Big Answers to the Big Questions: Where did it all come from? How did it all get here? How much is it all going to cost us? What is the purpose of life? Is there life after death? How will it all end? It left no navel stone unturned.

It was also clearly the work of human hands. You could tell. You could go on and on about Divine Inspiration whispering in the author's ear till the sacred cows came home, but everyone would know you were just talking through your laurel wreath. Someone mortal wrote it. Someone like you. Someone like me.

Which meant only one thing: Someone could tell a really good story. Thrills, excitement, romance, conflict, sex, the Big Bang and the Bitsy Burp, sex, organic soup 'n' sandwich on the primeval ocean floor, Adam, Eve, Lucy, sex, and a cast of gazillions (not counting trilobites) — !

But it was still just a good story. No proof it was real at all. The gods were pretty lies, made by humans, flawed like humans, ultimately toys in the hands of humans. Or writers. Everything the way it is and was and will be is all our fault. There's no one else to blame.

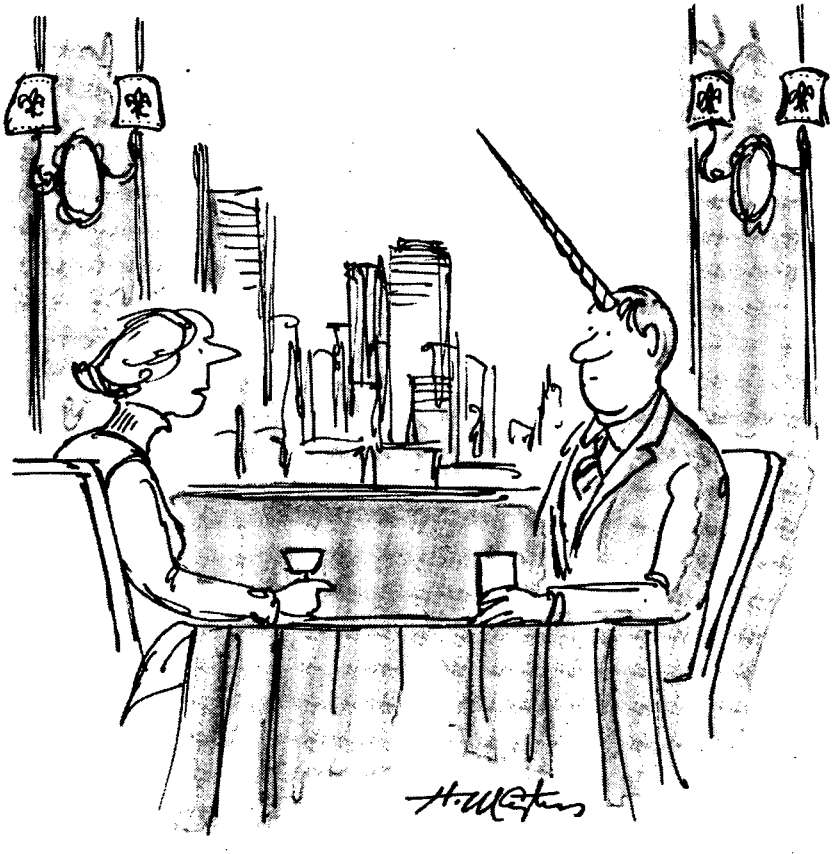
Oh, you don't believe me? Fine.

What the real story was: Great was the envy of far-reaching Apollo when he beheld the pride of the young hero who passed through the midst of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cheering crowds in the great chariot. "They give him worship better due to me," he said, and crouched in the Book Depository window with his mighty bow and unfailing arrow. Meanwhile, on the grassy knoll, Siva-Lord-of-Destruction was running through a few quick dance steps, his many hands balancing the sword, the spear, the dart, and the lotus. And in the next car back, Loki was saying to the beast-headed Set, "You know, if they'll *believe* bullets, maybe we should *give* them bullets," and Set was saying, "Just make sure you get the calibers to match, that's all."

And that's all.



"This is our last date, Ed. I'm sorry, but apparently my unicorn fetish is a teenage phase I've outgrown."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carrie Richerson's first appearance in F&SF *(Oct/Nov, 1992) earned her a nomination for the 1993 John W. Campbell award for best new writer. She made a second appearance a year later with her popular and controversial story, "The Light at the End of the Day." Both stories were set in an America where the murdered dead have returned for justice.*

This time, Carrie explores a different kind of justice. "Sous la Mer" is a beautiful and poetic tale about a woman, two men, and the sea.

Sous la Mer

By Carrie Richerson

THE LAST PLANGENT CHORD of "Adrift," the last whisper of Suzanne's voice, died away. She held the pose in the hush, head bent low over her guitar, her long, white-blonde hair concealing her face. With her diminutive size, her white dress, the snowy blanket over her lap, she looked like a statue of a child, hammered out of white gold, shining in the silvery pool of the single spotlight.

I peeked out from my vantage in the wing of the tiny stage and saw that a few of the audience were crying. Others looked stunned. Then first one, and another, began to clap, and soon the entire house was standing and applauding. It was only a small dinner-theater venue, several miles from Mobile's fashionable harbor district, but it was packed that night. Suzanne's reputation had preceded her.

She let it go on for a few minutes, pressing her hands together and bowing her thanks, rewarding her admirers with a shy smile. Then she spoke into the mike, "Thank you—thank you all so much for coming. Good night, and drive

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

carefully."

That was my cue. I stepped to her side, bowed my own acknowledgment to the audience, checked to make sure the blanket was tightly tucked around her stumps, and wheeled her offstage. Backstage, I held her guitar case while she put the instrument away, then navigated her wheelchair down the corridor and to the side door.

"I'll bring the car around. Will you be okay here?" I asked, taking the guitar case from her arms.

She nodded without speaking and pressed my hand. She looked tired. Singing was one of the few things that brought her joy in life, but the performances exhausted her. I wrapped my jacket around her shoulders and went for the car.

When I returned a few minutes later, a young man was kneeling beside the wheelchair and talking earnestly to Suzanne. The tired lines had vanished from her face; she was smiling and her eyes sparkled as she introduced me.

"Allan, this is my brother Merlin. Merle, this is Allan Lee." Allan stood and shook my hand with a grip as earnest as his manner. He looked to be about twenty years old; tall, muscled, tanned, with the smell of the sea about him. He dwarfed tiny Suzanne and towered over my own slight frame.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. D'Azora. I just wanted to tell your sister here how very much I enjoyed her singing. Her songs about the sea...they're just so full of beauty, of longing...." He laughed. "I can't express it the way you do, Ms. D'Azora — I just know I've been privileged to hear you."

There's one in every crowd. Someone to whom Suzanne's songs speak heart-to-heart. Someone who is half in love with the sea already, before he hears her sing. Someone who hears "On the Shoals of My Heart," "Stormsails," "'Round Cape Heartbreak," or "Adrift," songs of love and loss and the sea, always the sea — and whose life is never the same after the experience.

Allan Lee's dedication radiated from puppy-dog eyes as he bent to take Suzanne's hand. I spoke up: "My sister and I appreciate your kind remarks, Mr. Lee. Unfortunately, Suzanne is a little fatigued right now. I'd better take her home."

He stood aside with clear reluctance as I lifted Suzanne into the car, rearranged her blanket, folded the wheelchair, and placed it in the back seat. I went around to the driver's door; our eyes locked over the top of the car. My smile was stiff. "Good night, Mr. Lee."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was still standing there, looking bereft, as we pulled away. Suzanne waved farewell, then turned to me. "Merlin, you are such a *spoilsport*." She mimed a pout, then giggled.

"Leave him alone, Suzanne." I steered us home down the coast highway, directed by the cold, pointing stars.

Two weeks later Suzanne played at Boudreaux's in Biloxi, late sets Friday and Saturday nights. Allan Lee sat in the back of the house both nights; after Saturday's performance he came backstage to bring her a white rose.

She smiled and pressed his hand, then exclaimed over her clumsiness in scratching his wrist with a thorn. Allan protested that it was nothing. Without comment, I handed over my handkerchief for Suzanne to blot the tiny beads of blood. When Allan invited us both for drinks, I declined, pleading my driving responsibilities. After an awkward moment, Suzanne also made her apologies. Allan took note of my unspoken satisfaction, but I could tell by the set of his jaw that he was far from giving up.

A month later we were in Bay St. Louis, to provide afternoon entertainment during the annual Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet Festival. Allan took one of the seats in the first row of folding chairs and waved to Suzanne like an old friend as I wheeled her into place before the microphone.

After her set he insisted on giving us a guided tour of the piers. His father was a shrimper, he told us, and he delighted in pointing out and naming each freshly painted, flower-festooned, and holy-water-sprinkled boat. Flags and gay plastic streamers of all colors snapped in the breeze, and above our heads gray and white gulls laughed and tumbled as they snatched from midair the popcorn Suzanne threw to them — popcorn Allan had purchased for her.

I might as well have been invisible. Allan told her of his job feeding and training the performing stock at the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport. He was especially fond of the dolphins, praising their quick intelligence and constant good humor. Bored and irritated, I wandered on down the pier by myself, enjoying the warmth of the sun, the smells of salt and pitch and fish guts, the rhythmic slap of waves against pilings. If I closed my eyes I could pretend that I walked on the back of some great live thing, sunning itself and bobbing gently in the embrace of mother ocean.

The sight at the end of one of the side piers burst my reverie. A deep-sea fishing charter had just returned to port, and the triumphant client was posing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for pictures beside his catch, a blacktip shark fully as tall as he was. The dead thing hung suspended on a huge hook through the tail muscle; a black cloud of flies buzzed about its bloody maw where the teeth had been cut out for souvenirs. The fisherman swilled beer, loudly related his prey's fierce struggle, and showed off a vicious scratch on his arm received while landing the frenzied shark.

I felt sick, and turned away. By the time I made my way back to Suzanne and Allan I had regained my composure. I leaned against a railing and watched the two of them. It was clear that Allan thought he had made a conquest. He squatted beside Suzanne's wheelchair and helped her throw tidbits to the acrobatic gulls.

"Some of my friends go to USM — up in Hattiesburg, you know? Anyway, I told them about you, how well you sing. They said the student entertainment committee is always looking for singers to perform on campus. Why don't you give them a call? My friends sure want to hear you."

Suzanne shook her head. Pointing to the gulls overhead, she said, "Hattiesburg is too far for my friends." She and I traded a private smile. From the corner of my eye I saw frustration flicker over Allan's face. My smile grew wider.

Allan tried to recover lost ground with an invitation to dinner. I willed Suzanne to decline, but she accepted with delight. They flirted like schoolchildren throughout the meal, laughing and touching hands, matching each other glass for glass as they worked their way through two bottles of wine. When I refused a refill after my first glass, Suzanne shot me an exasperated look, but I ignored it. My hard-drinking youth ended on a patch of moon-drenched highway, to the sound of Suzanne's screams. These days I practice restraint.

At the end of the evening Allan lifted Suzanne out of her wheelchair and placed her in the car himself. For a moment she nestled her head against his chest. Hormones tingled in the air, and I wondered if they would drive off and leave me standing on the curb.

He didn't kiss her. Not yet. I beckoned him to join me at the rear bumper after Suzanne and he had said their farewells and he had shut the car door. He was flushed, prickly with the heat of his triumph, wary of my calm.

"Stay away from my sister, Allan." There was a harsh edge to my voice, but I didn't care what he thought.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My lack of subtlety surprised him. Then the testosterone kicked in, and he leaned over me. "You don't control her, man! I'll see Suzanne if she wants me to — and she does. You can't stop us!"

The young think all of life is a soap opera. I suppose if they live long enough they learn otherwise. I slammed the car door harder than was necessary, getting in. I love my sister dearly but sometimes I don't like her very much. Suzanne and I didn't speak all the way home.

I HAD PREPARED a simple meal of ceviche and salad, accompanied by an elegant chardonnay, for dinner; Suzanne and I ate on the terrace facing the sea as the sun set. The day had been clear and hot; as the light faded a breeze began to blow in off the water, dropping the temperature to something more tolerable. While we dined a full moon rose like a bloody tear over the water. Down on the shore the waves beat slowly, in time to my pulse.

We said little to each other over dinner. After so many years together our conversation had become largely non-verbal. An eyebrow lifted at the immensity of the rising moon, a silent nod at the silhouette of some late-soaring waterbird, a fond smile, spoke volumes. Suzanne seemed more relaxed than usual, thoughtful; several times I caught her staring blankly out over the sea, humming something under her breath. When I cleared the table after supper she asked me to leave her the bottle of wine and to bring her guitar and music notebook out to her.

She played a few chords of the new song she was working on for me; the title was "Sounding Sea." I tried to read for a while, but the moonlight and the distant mutter of the surf made me restless. I put down the book and watched Suzanne, pencil gripped between her teeth, as she picked out a line of melody, frowned over it, repeated it with a slight variation, then grabbed the pencil and recorded it. I didn't want my own restlessness to interfere with her concentration.

"I think I'll take a walk down the shore. Can I get you anything before I go?"

She shook her head absently. After a moment she noticed I was still there and laughed. "Go on, take your walk, dear. I'll be fine. I've got everything I need to keep me busy for hours."

I leaned over and kissed her hairline, right where the dark streak of her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

widow's peak begins. My own pale locks have acquired a similar sprinkling of dark hairs as I've grown older. Someday, when Suzanne and I are ancient, perhaps we will have raven tresses and be the envy of all our acquaintances.

Our little princedom by the sea. Suzanne and I had chosen this house precisely because, in defiance of tidal surge or hurricane, it sat so close to the water. And it was isolated; my sister and I are private people. Now I picked my way across a hundred yards of sand and shingle, and all the waters of the world rolled to a stop at my feet.

The tide was coming in, bringing with it brown mats of seaweed, and, tangled in the vegetation, thousands of the jellyfish known as Portuguese men-of-war. The floats bobbed in the low swells, and as the waves retreated, the jellyfish were stranded on the sands.

The bright moonlight showed me vivid, electric blue gasbags, topped with sails of delicate pink. They ranged in size from the length of my thumb to that of a football, and the beach ahead of me was littered with their membranous bodies for as far as I could see. Tomorrow's sun would heat the air trapped inside until the bags burst like balloons, leaving only a smear of bright blue on the sand.

I made my way south down the shore, avoiding the still-dangerous stinging tentacles of the jellyfish. Between waves I would step out onto the wet sand, looking for interesting shells or odd pieces of flotsam, but as each wave curled in, I danced backward to the dryline, careful not to get my shoes wet. Once I stepped on a jellyfish by mistake and the gasbag popped with a rush of sour, briny air. I fancied that I saw a movement in the tentacles then, but it must have been my imagination, or the wind. Jellyfish are incapable of feeling pain, or so scientists say.

I stopped on a sandy spit that curved out into the waters like the prow of a ship. The breeze had an iodiney nose that I have always found intoxicating, and I quested it for news. Occasionally a sharper gust of wind peppered my cheeks and the backs of my hands with stinging grains of sand. The round moon hammered a molten path across the wavetops, inviting me, and the song of the surf pulled at me like an undertow. For a long time I stared out at the junction of sky and water. Not a single light — not a ship nor a navigation buoy nor a drilling platform — showed in the darkness. I knew that I could walk out into those waves, and keep walking — forever.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My love for Suzanne, and the loyalty and guilt that have kept me by her side ever since her accident, stopped me. I turned my steps back to the house. Back to Suzanne.

I heard them before I saw them: sighs that were not the wind, moans that were not waves upon the shore. I had been gone for several hours; plenty of time for one to call the other, for an invitation to be issued and accepted, for passion to progress to foreplay, and beyond.

Allan had wheeled her chair down the ramp from the terrace into the sands, and spread her blanket next to it. I lingered in the shadows at the corner of the house and watched them. Suzanne was on top, her skin as white as wavefoam in the moonlight, her thighs gripping Allan's hips, the rounded stumps of her legs, amputated just above the knee, digging into the blanket for purchase.

My groin tightened as I watched Allan caress my sister's small, conical breasts, with their tiny aureoles and bullet-shaped, pink nipples; the pale hollows inside her hipbones; the froth of white hair between her legs; the delicate, pink membranes beneath.

He whispered words to her that the wind tore away, but she was too far gone to hear him anyway. Her nails left strange script on his chest, and when she came, she arched her back and screamed like one of her beloved gulls.

Without pulling out of her, he turned her beneath him and began to move. Her hands closed on his buttocks and pulled him hard against her; she came again just before he emptied himself into her. For a few moments she stroked him as he lay heavily atop her. When she reached into the pouch hanging from her wheelchair, I turned away.

Allan's muffled scream brought me back. The handle of the knife stood out from his back like some strange coral encrustation. He writhed and tried to call out again, but Suzanne is ruthless and accurate: the knife had punctured his lung, and his cries were little more than squeaks and bloody gurgles.

Suzanne squirmed out from under him and leaned back against the wheel of her chair to watch his throes. The look on her face, even as often as I have seen it, chilled me. Reluctantly I left my vantage point and moved to stand beside her. She glared up at me. "You took your sweet time coming back, Merlin!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I hooked a hand under the unfortunate Allan's shoulder and flipped him over. The impact drove the knife deeper into his back. He arched and tried to scream again; a shiny red bubble, as large as an apple, burst over his lips. One hand scrabbled for purchase in the sand, the other plucked at the torturing splinter in his back. I felt sorry for him, but I have never been able to deny Suzanne anything.

I left him writhing there, with Suzanne to keep him company, while I went after the tools I needed in the house. He was still alive — and conscious — when I took his legs. Alive, because the muscle and bone must be well-nourished and fresh; conscious, because Suzanne likes it that way. My scalpels sheared effortlessly through skin and muscle just above the knees; the battery-driven bone saw made quick work of the femurs. He fainted at one point, but I brought him around to watch as I pressed each bloody appendage home on Suzanne's stumps. The grafts took with wet sucking sounds.

I helped Suzanne to her new feet. Allan's sturdy, hairy legs looked absurd attached to her slim thighs, but they *worked*. Suzanne laughed at the horror and anguish on his face and skipped merrily away down the beach. For one night, until the borrowed legs withered and fell off at dawn, she was free.

I bent over Allan. "I *told* you to stay away from my sister. It was good advice. You should have taken it." I kissed him gently on the forehead, and broke his neck. Then I undressed, heaved his body onto my back, and started for the shore. Time enough tomorrow to clean up the evidence of his visit and make his car disappear.

On nights of the full moon a *mer* may take on human form and walk two-legged on the land. And on nights of the full moon a former *mer*, trapped in human flesh and exiled from the depths of home by staying human too long, may return to the sea. But if by misadventure a *mer* in human guise should lose her legs.... Well, how then to grow a tail?

Suzanne and I had been young and curious, fearless and thrill-seeking. We had visited the land many times before the night of the accident, had grown careless in our love for drinking, dancing, and gambling. The treasures of the deep seas can buy quite a lot of drink, dancing, and gambling, no questions asked.

Perhaps if I had not drunk so much that night, if my reactions had been faster to push her from the path of the speeding car as we staggered singing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

down the middle of the midnight highway.... I could not leave her as she lay bleeding and screaming under the car's wheels; or later, at the hospital, when they told me they would have to amputate her mangled legs — even though I felt moonset's imminence in my marrow.

Suzanne woke from the surgery screaming, and screamed until she was sedated again. When she woke a second time she made no sound at all, not even to speak, for weeks. But when the therapists tried to fit her healed stumps with artificial limbs, she began to scream again, as though the touch of those plastic and steel obscenities scalded her flesh. After a time I persuaded them to stop trying.

And I stayed with her, all these years. Mother Ocean, I *stayed.*

Suzanne was already frolicking in the waves when I strode up with the body. She had woven herself a girdle of men-of-war jellyfish; the bright blue floats adorned her hips and a forest of tentacles twisted and waved at her crotch. I could hear the tiny *snick, tic* of stingers firing ineffectually against her silver scales. "Suzanne, dearest" I said fondly, "you are a *monster.*"

"Come *on,* you slowpoke!" She laughed, and splashed me with her flukes. The longed-for, electric tingle swept over my skin as legs became tail, skin became scales and fins, gill-slits flared open. I dragged Allan's body under with one webbed hand, kicked once, and felt the water cleave before me. Humans call it a dolphin kick. Bah! I despise those goody-goody porpoises. Give me the noble fierceness of the sharks our brothers, who would take care of Allan's body for us. Allan Lee, like others before him who had loved the treacherous sea too well, would disappear without a trace.

The water tasted of all the news of home, and we had hours yet before moonset. But I have learned, in my human years, to feel guilt...and fear. What will happen on that night when Suzanne can no longer lure a human to her sacrifice? My sister and I love with a love that is more than sibling affection. I have lain where Allan Lee lay, and taken my pleasure there...and felt my shoulder blades itch, even in the moment of my ecstacy, awaiting the stroke of my destiny.

But for now, tonight, I was going *home.*

–With apologies to Mr. E. A. Poe.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

TOO MANY GHOSTS

ONCE IN A while, a movie comes along that is a bit of a revelation. It's so good that it makes you realize how bad Hollywood films are today. Occasionally, one of these treasures is actually made by a major studio. In the great majority of cases, it is not. It comes from an American indie, or more likely from Canada, England, France, Italy, China or any number of other countries where filmmaking is more art than marketing research.

Anthony Minghella's *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1991) was that kind of movie. The story of a woman lost in grief, who must find her way toward a new life, it was one of the loveliest, most romantic movies I have ever seen. It was also, to my mind, the best ghost movie since the 1940's.

As a few of you may recall, I briefly reviewed *Truly, Madly, Deeply* when it first came out, as part of the first column I wrote for *F&SF*. Why, you may then ask, am I speaking of it again? Because, at the time, this BBC film received very limited release in this country. Many of you were unable to see it in theaters. But now the film is widely available on tape and laserdisc, and occasionally on cable. So, there is no longer any excuse. If you haven't seen it yet, and if you have even the tiniest romantic bone in your body, go watch *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. It is a small, shining gem of a movie.

A paragon, in fact. Which is the other reason I feel compelled to praise it again. It has become the standard by which I judge ghost stories of the sentimental school (as opposed to ghost stories of the more frightening variety). Next to Minghella's movie, *Ghost* (1990), the American blockbuster — which I enjoyed at the time

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of its release — seems manipulative and empty.

And next to *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, a recent Hollywood heart-warmer, *Heart & Souls*, definitely left me cold. Which isn't to say that I didn't shed a few sentimental tears, and let loose with a few little chuckles as I watched it. But my reaction was as superficial as the story I had just watched. I wasn't really moved by the movie. And I didn't leave the theater with any fresh insights into the human spirit. In fact, I didn't leave the theater with much of anything beyond a sense of being mildly entertained for two hours.

Which is a shame, really. Because director Ron Underwood is a man of some skill. (He did the horror-comedy *Tremors* (1990), and the yuppie coming-of-middle-age comedy *City Slickers* (1991), prior to *Heart & Souls*.) Likewise, I was impressed with the caliber of the cast led by Robert Downey Jr., Charles Grodin, Alfre Woodard, Kyra Sedgewick, and Tom Sizemore.

But, let's face it, a movie is only as strong as the writing behind it. And although there's an old truism about strength in numbers, this does not apply to screenwriting. There was simply *too much* writing behind *Heart & Souls*.

The story behind the story goes something like this: Two film student brothers, Gregory and Erik Hansen made a ten-minute short called *Seven Souls*. It garnered enough attention that the Hansens were able to successfully pitch the idea of expanding the short. The two brothers developed the screenplay for producers Nancy Roberts and Sean Daniel. Then, when director Ron Underwood became attached to the project, his long-time partners, writers S. S. Wilson and Brent Maddock (*Short Circuit [I & II], Batteries Not Included, Ghost Dad, Tremors*) were brought in to (in the words of the press-kit) "enhance [Underwood's] vision of the movie."

The problem is, when you split up the old "vision thing" too many ways, it can leave an audience feeling something like Orson Welles in the mirrored confusion of *The Lady From Shanghai*'s finale: dazed, confused, and pissed enough to shoot somebody. *Heart & Souls* may not be *that* bad, but it does try to do too many things with too many characters.

Seems that one night in 1959, four people who don't know one another climb onto a San Francisco bus. The distracted driver (David Paymer) sends the bus flying over a bridge railing down to the tunnel entrance below. Everyone on the bus is killed, and the souls of the four passengers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are immediately drawn to a new soul being born in a side-swiped Rambler nearby.

The four ghosts have nothing but their deaths in common. One is a talented singer (Grodin) with paralyzing stage fright. One is a small-time crook (Sizemore), who recognizes that he's gone too far when he steals a sheet of valuable postage stamps from a young boy. One is a single mother (Woodard) who works nights to support her young family. And one is a waitress at the Purple Onion (Sedgewick) who fears that she may have just lost the man she loves, because she wanted to wait to marry.

In a moment, the four perish. They are dead, but not gone. They remain linked, almost tethered, to the baby born near the scene of their passing. The young boy grows under the loving care, not just of his mom and dad, but also of his four ghostly godparents. Which would be fine, except no one else can see little Tommy's quartet of confidants. And this starts to make the young lad appear delusional to the rational, adult world around him.

For his own good, the four decide to abandon visual contact with their protege. Still, they dog him invisibly until a day when their bus driver shows up again, apologizing for a bureaucratic mix-up, and calling them to their hereafter. But none of the four is willing to leave when they learn that Thomas, now a cold, ambitious young banker (Downey), was, they now learn, the corporeal being assigned to them to resolve the unfinished business they had when they were suddenly killed.

Okay, let's stop right there for a minute. We're told that the four ghosts are years and years late in being called to their final reward. (Evidently they fell through the cracks the same way they fell off the bridge.) What? Was a toddler supposed to resolve their lives for them, even though he undoubtedly wasn't even allowed to cross the street on his own?

All right, I'm willing to accept the fact that, say, a ten-year-old might have been able to do some small tasks for his phantom family (even though he couldn't drive and probably wasn't allowed on city buses without his mom). The chronological aspects of this high concept, I'm willing to let slide. It's the concept itself I find way too Hollywood.

Other people — no matter how old, wise, rich, leisured — cannot resolve your life for you. And certainly, as complex and flawed as our human existences are, a single act performed by even the Dalai Lama is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not going to smooth over the ragged edges of an unfinished life.

Why does Hollywood require the quick fix — a sitcomish resolution to humanity's most complicated problems? Do they really believe that we require so facile and false a cultural product? They must believe it. But I don't. Not when there is a movie like *Truly, Madly, Deeply* around for comparison. (Not everyone got a chance to see Mr. Minghella's film, but everyone I know who has seen it enjoyed it and was moved by it.)

Dear Anthony filled his picture with hope and love, without even attempting to tie everything up with a pretty bow in the end. And he also understands what I call the Topper rule. You can have as many ghosts as you want in a movie. (Minghella has at least a dozen.) But no more than two should form primary relationships with the living lead.

In *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (as in *Ghost*) the key relationship was one-on-one between a living woman and her dead lover. *Topper* went as far as you should, matching a lively yet dead wife and husband, Marion and George Kerby (Constance Bennett and Cary Grant) with their gloomy friend, Cosmo Topper (Roland Young). They are supposed to redeem the meaningless frivolity of their own lives, by doing the good deed of teaching Topper how to love life and live it to the fullest.

Heart & Souls sets a similar task for its ghosts. Although they need their pet human to solve their problems for them, they are also happy to teach the callow Thomas a few things about seizing the moment and loving life (and the right woman). It's a nice thought, but to make it the least believable, you need time to develop a relationship and show change in Thomas's outlook.

Mr. Underwood, although capable of getting such emotional texture on screen, simply doesn't have the time to do so. His movie is just too busy — crowded with far too many primary characters. He doesn't have one life to heal, but a half dozen. Four ghosts require Thomas's assistance in tidying up their earthly travails. And then there's Thomas who needs to learn to make a commitment to something more than the acquisition of wealth before it's too late. Then there's his girlfriend (Elizabeth Shue), who's getting impatient for him to make a commitment to *her*.

A case in point of a movie concept spread way too thin is the development of Ms. Shue's role. There isn't any. She is a character we know nothing about, even though she has what amounts to the female roman-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tic lead. She meets up with Mr. Downey in a couple of scenes, wherein she pouts or looks puzzled, and then promptly disappears again — showing up at movie's end long enough to fall into his arms.

And unfortunately, the other characters are defined with only slightly more clarity. It's hard to feel much for these people, knowing as little as we do about them. Although, heaven knows, the actors do the best they can with characters that are essentially stereotypes. They are the milquetoast, the wiseguy, the mom and the cute chick. (Notice that the men are defined by what they do — or fail to do — in the world, and the women's concerns revolve completely around family and marriage. This movie really is stuck in 1959!)

But let me mention one thing I did like about this movie. The special effects are nicely done and judiciously used, and are never showy or intrusive. I wish this were the case more often. And I tip my hat to visual effects producer Julia Gibson (*The Abyss*) and to Ron Underwood for their naturalistic approach to their fantastical, other-worldly visuals. Too bad the rest of the movie wasn't made to match.

At times you get a glimpse of Mr. Underwood's warmth and naturalness in *Heart & Souls*, and then you lose it again in all the hustle and bustle of the cluttered storyline. It's so disappointing when you sense a humane little human comedy that has been done to death by the Hollywood treatment.

And so, ultimately, I cannot recommend *Heart & Souls*. It qualifies as one of those inconsequential flicks worth watching on tape or cable, when no better alternative presents itself. And that's about as much as can be said for it.

The film isn't completely heartless. What heart there is is definitely in the right place. And Robert Downey Jr., a gifted comic actor who somehow manages to combine a worldly sensuality and decadent gleam with an air of childlike innocence, is always fascinating to watch.

But *Heart & Souls* doesn't have half the heart and soul of *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. If you've seen neither — there's no contest. In fact, if you only saw *Truly, Madly, Deeply* once, a couple of years back, it's time to enjoy it again. (I've seen it three times, and have enjoyed it more with each viewing.)

And if the lads of tinseltown ever wonder how a good ghost movie is made, Anthony Minghella has the answer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Susan Wade has just sold her first novel, Walking Rain, *to Bantam Books. Her short fiction has appeared in* Starshore, Amazing Stories, *and the anthology* Snow White, Blood Red. *Although "The Convertible Coven" marks her first appearance in* F&SF, *she has several more stories in our inventory.*

The Convertible Coven

By Susan Wade

I CUT OUT OF MY TRIG class twenty minutes early on Wednesday to make the meeting of the "Powers of Witchcraft" series at the Pagan Church. I hated to leave because Dr. Lufkin was explaining the Hartford algorithm and talking about its development process, which was fascinating. Plus Dr. L. gave me a disappointed look as I left, which made me feel bad. He's a great prof.

Anyway, I left, and twenty minutes should have been plenty of time to make it to the seminar, except Mr. Brown wouldn't start. Mr. Brown is my car. He's a 1969 VW fastback with a sunroof and a dark bronze-brown paint job, which is how he got his name.

My father still hasn't reconciled himself to me buying Mr. Brown instead of the seven-year-old Toyota he had all picked out for me. But the second I walked onto that used-car lot and saw Mr. Brown, with that dent in his fender that looked just like a dimple in his front-grille smile, I knew he was the car for me. The way I look at it, I worked two summers to save

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the money, and it was going to be my car, not Dad's. Mr. Brown may not be as new as that Toyota was, but he's got character.

On the Wednesday in question, he was displaying more than usual. I got in, flung my backpack in the passenger seat, and prepared myself for the ritual by clearing my mind, taking deep breaths, and opening myself to the inner light. Then, when I was certain my aura was clear, I inserted the key in the ignition, pumped the accelerator three and one-fourth times, and turned the key.

This works every time, if I've really found inner stillness. I guess I hadn't because Mr. Brown gave a long soggy cough and nothing more. I tried again. No dice.

A guy with short kinky black hair and a kind of goofy-looking shy grin stopped next to Mr. Brown. He shifted his books to his left arm and said, "Excuse me, miss. Maybe I can help?"

I was about to explain that conversations distracted me from cleansing my aura, when he added, "Sounds to me like one of your spark-plug wires has worked loose."

Mr. Brown *had* sounded funny. I got out. "Hey, you might be right," I said, opening the trunk and checking the connections. One of the rubber connector caps at the end of a wire was cracked and wasn't seated tightly. "How'd you guess?"

The guy got a little pink. "I work on cars. It's how I'm putting myself through school. VW's are my specialty."

I held out a hand. "I'm Angie," I said. "Thanks for the suggestion."

He shook my hand. "Ray Cooper. This is a really nice little fastback you got here."

"Thanks, Ray," I said. I finished wiggling the connector into place and closed the trunk. "Mr. Brown is one of my favorite people. Hey, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm late for a meeting. Thanks again."

"Sure," he said. He opened the door for me, which surprised me a little. He closed Mr. Brown's door gently, with just the right amount of lift at the end to get it to shut securely. "See you, Angie," he said.

"See you." I didn't go through the whole aura thing with him standing there, but Mr. Brown purred like a big tabby when I turned the key.

I was only fifteen minutes late to the seminar.

Keith was waiting at the back of the church auditorium (they rent the building from a bookstore that went bust, so the auditorium's not very big),

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tapping his foot. "Angie," he hissed as soon as he saw me, "I told you, twelve *sharp*."

Keith's the best-looking guy I've ever met: he's got big gray-blue eyes and long dark hair that looks like Dennis Miller's. He's also the one who turned me on to the witchcraft series at the church, which was very nice of him. "Sorry, Keith," I whispered.

We made our way to the seats in the third row he had held with his notebook and sweater. The woman at the end of the aisle gave me an assessing look as we climbed over her — I figured she was wondering how attached Keith was to me and maybe whether she could lay a hex to get rid of me. I dragged my backpack over her knees and smiled apologetically.

Today's topic was "Finding Your Familiar," and Keith already had his notebook out and was scribbling notes. I got mine out of my pack too.

The lecturer stood on a small stage with blue velvet curtains. She was a heavyset woman who had very straight, very long black hair and bangs, and was wearing a loose purple caftan with gold embroidery around the collar and hem.

"— familiar is a very important part of developing your powers as a witch," she was saying. They must have started late, because it didn't sound as if we'd missed much. "Truthfully, in most cases, witches don't really come into their powers until they have three things: a familiar, a personal grimoire, and membership in a coven."

I made a note. I'd been working on my book of spells for almost three years, and Keith was going to propose me for membership in his coven when Sharon Silversmith transferred to Omaha next month. It sounded like all I had to do now was find my familiar.

"What's her name?" I whispered to Keith.

He frowned. "I told you," he said under his breath. "Karina. She's the priestess of my coven."

"Oh," I said.

"In the course of this series," Karina went on, "we will look at many factors of importance to a witch's power, but few are more important than finding the right familiar. A familiar acts as a guide and protects the witch, and sometimes may perform magic services for her." She paused, and added with a smile at Keith, "Or *him*."

Keith jiggled in his seat a little and smiled back at her.

"The uninitiated often think the familiar is just an animal, but it is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

actually a spirit which is sometimes *embodied* in an animal. In other words, the spirit may manifest on this plane as a cat or a salamander, but it is in actuality a denizen of another plane. It just takes a preferred shape in its service to us on this side. Is that clear?"

I leaned over to Keith, who smelled strongly of rosemary oil, which made me wonder what kind of protective spells he'd been doing. "Is a familiar's service voluntary?"

"Hush," he said.

Karina continued. "Before any of you here attempt to capture and embody a familiar spirit, you should first look around you to see whether one has come to you voluntarily. Given the correct controls, a captured familiar will behave quite well, but a spirit that serves you of its own accord is better. My own familiar, the Spirit Androcles, serves me as a means to bring light to the earthly plane. He feels that I will manifest his message to many, which is why he has chosen to ally himself with me in this lifetime." She gestured toward one side of the stage.

An enormous Siamese tomcat stalked onto the stage. He paused, surveying the audience contemptuously for a moment before he leaped up to the lecturn and balanced on one side of it. He looked straight at me, and I sneezed. People around us turned to look at me. I have kind of a loud sneeze. The cat blinked, and I sneezed again. Seeming satisfied with that, he looked down and began licking one paw.

I fished a tissue out of my backpack and blew my nose.

Keith leaned over, the smell of rosemary stronger than ever. I sneezed again. "What's wrong with you?" Keith asked.

"I'b allergig to cads," I said.

"Are you?" He frowned. "He's at least ten feet away."

"I dow," I said.

Karina was saying, "—Androcles does many things for me. He warns me of danger from malicious spirits and often helps me select students of exceptional talent for advanced work. For example, it was Androcles who pointed out Keith Henderson as someone with particularly powerful, if untutored, psychic powers. Keith, stand up."

Keith did. Androcles looked at me again, and I sneezed.

"Why, I believe Androcles is telling me something right now," Karina said. "What's *your* name?" She pointed to me.

"Adgie," I said. I blew my nose again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, you must come to a discussion meeting very soon, Angie," Karina said. "Now, let's talk about how you'll know when a familiar spirit has been drawn to you. Let me tell you how I knew that Androcles was more than just a cat."

Androcles stopped licking his paw and assumed a regal position on the podium, head erect, tail neatly curled around his body.

"Thad cad bust weigh fordy pouds," I whispered to Keith.

"Shush!" he hissed.

"Almost seven years ago," Karina said, "a cat came to my back door one day. She wouldn't leave, so we adopted each other. A few weeks later, she gave birth to three kittens." She paused dramatically.

"Both the mama and two of the kittens died. Only one kitten survived, and I had to hand-feed him until he was old enough to lap. And as soon as Androcles was born, I began having dreams of a past life in which we were together."

She folded her hands on the podium and leaned forward confidingly. Androcles flicked his tail, once up, once down, as if he wanted to make sure we were paying attention. "I was an Egyptian princess in a past life," Karina said, "and Egyptian nobility were guarded by sacred lions. After Androcles was born, I began having dreams of Egypt, where I would walk with my hand on the head of a lion. That lion was Androcles, and he has come to me again in this lifetime to fulfill the same role: that of protector and guide."

Karina lifted her hand, and I saw a large ruby wink in the light. She laid her hand on Androcles' head. "If you go to pick out a pet, and the second you see the litter, you say to yourself, 'That's the one for me,' you've probably found your familiar."

She bowed her head and everyone clapped. Several people raised their hands to ask questions, but Androcles jumped down from the podium and exited through the wings. Karina was right behind him.

Keith turned to me, his eyes alight with excitement, which made my heart flutter. "Isn't she marvelous?" he said.

"Why, yes," I said. "It was a very interesting lecture." Privately, I considered Dr. L.'s to have been better, but I knew Keith wasn't interested in algorithms.

"She said you should come to our next discussion meeting," he said. "I think she was given a message for you."

"Good," I said. "Maybe it'll be about how to find my familiar. I'm doing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the other things she talked about — my rituals are working. But I'd really like to find my familiar. And join your coven, of course."

He nodded seriously. "Yes, a familiar is important — a sign that you've opened yourself to the Animate Nature of the All."

"So when's the next discussion group?" I asked.

"Tomorrow night, at Karina's house. Why don't you pick me up at 6:30, and I'll show you where she lives?"

"That sounds wonderful, Keith," I said. I was already wondering what I should wear.

I DECIDED ON a pair of black leggings with a long emerald-green tunic that had black embroidery around the cuffs and collar (taking a leaf from Karina's book). I wore my black boots and did my hair big. Frankly, I looked pretty hot.

Blowing my hair dry had taken longer than usual, so it was a little after six when I grabbed my bag and my car keys and headed out the door. Mr. Brown sat in the driveway, the sickle-shaped dimple in his fender looking jauntier than ever. I gave him a loving pat as I went by.

Since I'd just gotten out of the shower, I figured my aura didn't need any more cleansing. I stuck the key in and cranked. Mr. Brown started right up. He'd been humming along real happily ever since I'd jiggled his wires the day before.

We backed out of the driveway and headed north, toward Keith's apartment. I was feeling so good, I started to sing a little, an old tune, "Age of Aquarius." Mr. Brown rattled a bit, adding great percussion. We jammed all the way to Keith's.

It was right at 6:30 so I just pulled up by the curb and gave a little toodle on the horn. Keith came out of the building right away, looking better than ever.

"Hi," he said, smiling at me as he tried to open the passenger door. He gave it a good yank, but it was stuck or something and wouldn't open.

I leaned across and hammered on the doorframe with my fist. "C'mon, Mr. Brown," I said, "open up, or we'll be late." On the third punch, the door gave suddenly. The upper corner caught Keith right above the eye.

"Ow!" He touched his eyebrow gingerly. "That really hurts," he said.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Keith. The door's never gotten stuck like that before. You want to go back in and get some ice for it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He got in and sat down. "No, I don't want you to be late to Karina's meeting. This is a big honor for you, to be invited so soon. And it'll be a chance for you to meet the other members of the coven."

"Wonderful! I'm really sorry about your eye."

He rubbed it gently. "It'll be O.K. I just hope it doesn't turn black." He gave me directions, and we got to Karina's house right on time.

She had a medium-sized house in a nice neighborhood on the north side of town. Her yard was a little shaggier than the neighbors'. But otherwise it looked like an ordinary house. When I said something to Keith about it, he said, "What did you expect? Gingerbread?"

At first I thought he was talking about Victorian trim. Then I got it and laughed. "Don't be silly. I guess I thought it would look more mysterious, is all."

"Wait till you see inside," he said.

Inside *was* pretty unusual. Karina's living room was painted midnight blue — walls, ceiling, *and* the hardwood floor. Glow-in-the-dark stars glimmered on the ceiling, and a frosted white globe hung from a silver chain in the center. A silver pentagram in a golden circle was painted on the blue floor. No furniture, just large blue cushions piled around the corners outside the pentagram. About a dozen people were sitting around talking. All of them were women, and most were wearing jeans. Great.

Keith nabbed us a couple of cushions and we sat down. His eye was puffing up so much, I was scared to ask how it felt.

A blonde woman with a long pageboy was sitting near where we had staked out floor space. Keith introduced her as Sharon Silversmith.

"Oh, hi," I said. "You're the one who's being transferred to Omaha, right?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll miss our community here, but it's necessary."

"Is it a job transfer? What do you do?" I asked her.

She smiled. "Well yes, in a way. I've been called to start a new coven in that area. You see, this *is* what I do." She gestured around the room.

I gulped. "Excuse me. I've never known anyone who was a full-time witch before," I said. "But then, I guess I've never known many witches either. That's one of the reasons I'm so excited about joining the coven — it helps so much to have a community, people who are interested in the same things you are and all."

Sharon smiled. "How did you get interested in paganism, Angie?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, I think I was born pagan, really. I mean, paganism is the belief that all things are animate, right?"

She nodded. "More or less."

"Well, as far back as I can remember, everything seemed to be alive to me. For instance, when I was little, just learning to count and all, in my head, numbers had color and gender and a kind of — personality. So when I took a comparative-religion class in my freshman year, and learned something about paganism, it just clicked. I did some more reading, and things just kind of grew from there."

"That's interesting," Sharon said. "I've never heard the paganist view applied to mathematical concepts before. . . ."

A young woman sitting behind her leaned over and said, "Hi, I'm Barbara Cowdin. Keith told me you were a student too. Are you at U.T.?"

I nodded.

"We have something in common then," she said. "I'm doing my Master's in theology right now, but it seems narrow, so I may switch to rhetoric for my doctorate. What's your major?"

"Computer science," I said. My voice sounded real loud all of a sudden, because one of those lulls in conversation had just hit. People all over the room were looking at me.

"Computer *sci*ence?" Barbara said. You could tell that, to her, it was like admitting to using plastic garbage bags.

"It's because I'm an Aquarius," I said quickly. "You know, electronics are our thing." Everybody kind of relaxed, and just about then Karina came in. She was wearing a saffron-yellow caftan this time, with purple embroidery on it. I was pleased to see that my choice of clothes was going to work out after all.

"Welcome, everybody," Karina said. She opened a cupboard and took out a very large gold cushion, which she carried to the center of the pentagram. She sat down on it and beckoned, "Friends, let's begin our discussion."

Everyone picked up their cushions and moved to the perimeter of the circle. Karina saw me and waved me over. I set my cushion down next to Keith's and stepped a little nervously into the pentagram. I felt a little tingle as I crossed the line, like when you get a low-level electrical shock. A thrill went through me, I have to admit. Magic!

"Angie," Karina said. Her voice echoed off the walls a little bit, because of there not being any furniture, I guess.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hi, Karina," I said. "Thanks for inviting me to come."

"Oh, we're delighted to have you," she said. "Androcles told me you must join us."

"Androcles?" I said, looking around. "Uh, is he here right now?"

"No, dear, unfortunately not. He went on a little errand for me. But he gave me a message for you. Sit," she said, and patted a spot next to her on the floor. I went and got my cushion and sat where she'd indicated.

Karina took my hand, pressed it flat between her palms, and closed her eyes. "Your energy is bright," she said. "Vivid and strong, the energy of the new age, the Age of Aquarius. Androcles' message is this: in seeking your familiar, you must not be deceived by an unfamiliar guise. Nor must you be deceived by the familiarity of the spirit which guides you. Look around you for the spirit, Angie, which you will know by the sign of the crescent moon. Search well, for when you find your familiar, Androcles says you will find your true path in life as well."

People were nodding very seriously. Apparently a message from Androcles was a big deal. "Thank you for giving me Androcles' message, Karina. And please thank Androcles for me too." I wasn't too sure of the etiquette involved.

Karina laughed. "No need for me to do that. I see he's returned from his errand."

I looked up and saw the big cat sitting just inside the circle, holding a twitching green lizard in his mouth. I sneezed. "Thank you, Androcles," I said.

Karina said, "He says you're welcome. Androcles, how wonderful that you are so prompt in returning to us. Will you put the blessing in my workroom, please?"

The cat got up and walked off, still carrying the lizard. I sneezed.

"Well," Karina said. "Any thoughts about the message? Keith, you know Angie best."

Keith cleared his throat. "Well, Androcles is telling Angie that her familiar may take an unusual form, maybe not a cat or a dog or a bird, as many of us have." He nodded to the others.

"I'm allergic to all those things," I said.

"Apparently, finding her familiar will bring her to full power, and give her the guidance to find her destiny in life." Keith spoke in a deeper voice than usual, almost like it was his message, instead of Androcles'.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Exactly!" Karina said.

Sharon said, "Angie, do you have any pets, or any wild animals that you take care of?"

"I've been thinking about that," I said. "I've never had pets because of my allergies. I feed the squirrels at school sometimes, but that's about it."

"Odd," Karina said. "But Androcles' message will help you find your spirit. He's never wrong, you know, because he sees into the spirit world. In fact, when I had an out-of-body experience last week and stayed gone from my physical body too long, Androcles came and found me and brought me back."

Barbara had moved over to the spot next to Keith. Now she said, "Oh, do tell us about it, Karina."

The discussion went on for a while, ranging over lots of interesting astral adventures Karina'd had. But I had trouble concentrating, because Androcles came back into the room, and I kept sneezing.

I blotted a lot and tried to listen. I was wondering if it would ruin my chances for joining the coven if I went outside for some fresh air, when Karina said, "Well, that's about it for tonight, friends. Except for one last item. As you all know, Keith is proposing that Angie join our coven. *After* Sharon leaves for Nebraska, of course, so our numbers remain correct. But Angie must first perform a major ritual for the benefit of the coven. Who will volunteer to work with her on the ritual?"

I sneezed, and Keith said, "I will."

I liked the sound of that. "Thag you," I said.

"Wonderful!" Karina said. "Any other business for tonight? No? Good night!" She got up and left the room. Androcles blinked one last time at me, then followed her before the echoes of my sneeze had faded.

Keith came over. I noticed his eye was really discolored. "Barbara's got an arnica poultice she says will help my eye," he said. "She's going to take me home so we can pick it up. Can you find your way home from here O.K.?"

"Sure," I said. "Do probleb."

I followed them outside and went over to Mr. Brown and watched Barbara get into a red Celica. I thought Keith might stop to say something to me, but he followed right after her.

Kind of a disappointing evening, in spite of getting a message special

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

delivery from the spirit world.

"I'll call you about the ritual," Keith called. He waved and got into Barbara's car.

I watched them until the red tail lights of the Celica were out of sight, and consoled myself with the thought that at least I had Mr. Brown for company.

I cut my afternoon class the next day to go to the library and look for spells. My grimoire was mostly full of practical spells: rituals designed to bring in money (really handy around scholarship time, let me tell you), to aid memory (exam time), to get your enemies off your back (handy with some of the TA's), stuff like that. I didn't think any of my spells would go over too well with Karina's coven. I needed something big, like for world peace or something.

But most of the books I found in the library were pretty coy about listing actual spells. After several hours, I gave up and got permission to go into the rare-book stacks. I found a couple of good grimoires there, but I'd have to photocopy any pages that interested me, because they listed the ingredients for the rituals in code. All those newt's tongues and adder's eyes and stuff — those are just codes for different herbs and roots, because the witches in the olden days didn't want their secrets to get out. I could translate the recipes at home, once I normalized the funky old spelling, because I'd written a PC-based translator program for ritual ingredients awhile back.

But none of the spells seemed like they would be very useful to the coven. There was a spell To Cast Demons from Thy Cow; another To Stop a Bird in Flight. To Bring Forth Water from Ye Dry Well. To Win the Heart of the One You Love.

Hmmmm. I copied that one. You never know when something like that might come in handy.

I kept looking, hoping to find a ritual that would be beneficial to the coven. Finally, I found one that sounded mighty useful to me: To Summon Elementals of the Air. Well, maybe not the height of practicality, but you never know when an air elemental may be able to help out. Just think of the possibilities.

So I copied that spell too, and went home to read them both over. Once I had the ingredients translated, I saw that I could get them at the herb store

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on Braker without any trouble: it was mostly stuff I already had anyway, like vervain and oils of rosemary and peppermint. The only snag was that the spell to summon an elemental required that I find a place of power where I could conduct the ritual.

A place of power. All I could think of was Stonehenge. How would I go about finding the right kind of place? Maybe Keith would know. I decided to call him.

When he answered the phone, I said, "Hey, Keith. How's the eye?"

"Oh, it's much better," he said. "That arnica poultice really did the trick. Barbara sure knows her herbs."

"That's nice," I said. "Are you feeling up to helping me with my ritual? I've found one I think would be good, but I've got some questions about it."

"O.K.," he said. "What's the spell?"

I explained what it was for.

"Uh," he said. "That sounds pretty ambitious, Angie."

I glanced at the spell again. "Well, it's pretty straightforward-looking except that I'm supposed to find a 'place of power' where I'll conduct the ritual. That's the only part I need help with."

"Oh," he said, sounding relieved. "That's simple. What you do is get a crystal pendulum that's attuned to your personal vibrations — you're an Aquarius, so amethyst is probably best — and wear it around your neck at all times. When you cross a point where the earth meridians connect with your own chakra meridians, you'll feel something."

"Kind of like a mild electric shock?" I said. "I felt that when I crossed into Karina's pentagram last night."

"Exactly! Androcles was right about you, Angie. You're really actualizing your personal powers."

"Why, thank you, Keith. That's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me."

"Uh —"

"So, when do you want to get together to work on the ritual?" I asked.

"Well, I've got plans for this weekend," he said. "There's a psychic fair in San Antonio. But once you think you've found the right place, give me a call."

Well, I couldn't exactly invite myself along to the fair, so I agreed. After we hung up, I decided that I needed to find that power spot A.S.A.P. I made a list of the things I'd need and went to the herb shop, which was open until

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

six on Fridays. They carried crystals there, too.

MR. BROWN was in a good mood, I could tell. He was shaking out some seriously good percussion on the way to the shop. "We're going to be in business for real, pretty soon," I said to him as we pulled into the parking lot, giving his dashboard a little pat. "And, who knows? Maybe Keith and I will be setting up a little partnership of our own."

I turned off the key, and he gagged and dieseled for at least a minute before shutting down. It made me wonder if something was wrong, or if he just was feeling so good he didn't want to stop yet. I decided to see how he sounded later, and got out.

Just then a white Karmann Ghia covertible pulled up next to us. "Hey, dude," I whispered to Mr. B., "check out this classy chassis."

A guy got out of the Ghia, looked at me and said, "Hi, Angie! What are you doing here?"

I did a double take, not recognizing him right off. Then I saw it was the guy I'd met at school the other day — what was his name? "Hiya," I said. "The mechanic, right? Roy?"

"Ray," he said, giving me that goofy grin again. He was tall, a pretty big guy to be driving a Ghia.

"Sharp car," I said. "She looks like a restoration job."

He got a little pink around the ears. "Did all the work on her myself," he said. "Classic cars are kind of a hobby of mine. But not the fancy kind, you know, the Mustangs and that sort of thing. I like a car with some character."

"Me too," I said. "Hey, you come here often?"

"Uh, no," he said. "This is the first time. But I need some herbs for something, and a friend told me this was the place to get them."

"Your friend was right. C'mon, I'll show you the ropes." We went in, and I showed him how to find the right herbs in the apothecary jars and how to bag them and stuff. I noticed he was getting a lot of the same things I was, but I didn't say anything. No point in being nosy.

After a little bit, I left him talking to the woman at the herb counter, found myself an amethyst pendulum and checked out. The clerk gave me a silk cord for the pendulum, and I put it around my neck right away. Ray was still talking to the herb lady, so I waved at him and left. I was ready

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to rock and roll.

Mr. Brown started up smooth and purred like a cat, although he reversed a little slower than usual. "Been flirting with that Ghia, have you, Mr. B.? Come on now, time to go. Spirits of the Air, here we come, right?"

And the best thing was, I found a place of power right on my way home — the interchange at Braker and Loop 1.

It was really mystical. Evening had come by then. The first stars were beginning to show, with a three-quarter moon hanging overhead like a silver coin dropping through a slot in the deep-blue bowl of the sky. Mr. Brown and I buzzed along the access road, smooth pavement humming under our wheels, and when I came onto the wide curving entrance ramp, I got the feeling we were about to soar off into the sky, into another dimension. And then I got a hundred-watt jolt from the amethyst lying on my chest.

The place — it felt incredible — the huge white columns, the arching ramps of the exchange — they looked like Grecian ruins in the moonlight, like the awesome stones of a truly sacred place.

And then we were past the exchange, spiraling down to the regular highway, and the feeling faded.

"But we found it, Mr. Brown!" I said. "And so quick! Are we actualized or what?"

I had meant to memorize the spell, but didn't get a chance because it had to be done at midnight "on the full of the moon." That was only a couple of days away, and I still had to gather some things up: some frankincense and blue ribbons, blue candles, rock salt, and a flagon of springwater. Plus I had to dress in a blue robe with a blue cord around my waist — I was running around a lot that weekend getting all the stuff together. I called Keith and left a message on his answering machine about doing the ritual at midnight on Monday.

Classes on Monday dragged, even my Advanced Design Theory which I usually love. But I was pretty excited. For one thing, I'd never seen an air elemental, much less bound one to service. And I was pretty sure the ritual would impress the coven. Not just anybody can summon up elementals.

When I got home there was a message on my machine from Keith saying he'd be ready at 11:30, but he hoped we wouldn't be out all night because he was scheduled to have a reading the next day and didn't want

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his aura deplenished.

It was a really nice evening — cool and clear. A good omen. I put all my paraphernalia in my backpack. Then I set my alarm for eleven and took a nap. Aura deplenishing and like that.

When I got up, I felt sparked, like I'd had a full night's sleep. Mr. Brown was in a terrific mood, too, I could tell. I opened the sunroof to let in the night air, put the spell stuff in the backseat, and took off for Keith's house. For some reason, I missed the exit and had to double back, so it was about 11:40 when we got there. He was waiting out front, shivering a little.

"Hi," I said. "Sorry we're late."

"We?" He peered into the car's backseat. "Is someone else with you?"

"Just Mr. Brown," I said, giving the dashboard a pat.

"You're weird about this car, Angie," he said. He grabbed the door handle and gave it a good yank. The door flew open, and Keith fell down. I heard his shoes clunk on the curb as he bounced.

"You O.K.?" I asked him.

He stood up, brushing at his jeans. "I guess so. Damn it, I just washed these." He got in and closed the door very carefully, then fastened his seat belt. "I've been doing protective rituals, but they just don't seem to be working right."

I started to apologize again, but he said, "Forget it, let's just go."

"O.K.," I said. "This should be quite an adventure. I've never summoned an elemental before."

"You havent?" Keith eyed me. "Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Of course, I said. "I found a place of enormous personal power right after I got the stuff for the spell, and the way I see it, things are falling into place for a reason."

"If you say so."

We zipped along Loop 1 at about sixty-five, because there was no traffic. Keith complained he was cold with the sunroof open, but we were at the Braker exchange in less than ten minutes, so I didn't bother closing it. I exited and pulled off on the left side, just under the first big ramp.

The jolt from my pendulum was even bigger this time. Then it settled down to a continuous tingle. I could feel the energy humming along my skin and inside my bones. "Wow," I said. "This place makes me feel like I could fly."

The ramps and columns were even more beautiful in full moonlight,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gleaming white and mysterious overhead, weaving complex patterns of energy against the sky.

I got out of the car. "Isn't it *gorgeous*?"

Keith just sat there for a second. I leaned in to get my backpack from the backseat, and he said, "You're kidding, right?"

"About what?" I said. I set my pack in the driver's seat and opened it. The robe was on top. I pulled it on over my jeans and tied the cord at my waist.

Keith leaned across and put his arm over the top of my pack. "About conducting a ritual here," he said. "All this *concrete*."

"What about it?"

"It's as far from a celebration of the natural world as — as an *oil derrick*," he said.

"Oil derricks are neat," I said. "There's one down near Corpus that's lit by those pinkish-golden halogen lamps, you know the kind I mean? At night it looks like a fairy palace. Stinks, though."

"Angie," Keith said. "No elemental is going to come here. This is a travesty, a corruption, of everything paganism means."

I yanked the backpack out from under his arm and set it on the hood. "I disagree," I said. "Isn't Stonehenge a sacred place?"

"Of course." He sounded patronizing.

"Well, how is this any different from Stonehenge? People built that too. It's a pattern built from stone and so is this. *I* can feel the energy here, even if you can't." I touched two fingers to his hand, and he jumped.

"People built Stonehenge as a place of worship," he said. "It's the astrological arrangement of the stones and the accumulated energy from worship that makes it sacred."

"*You* don't know why they built it. It could have just been a picnic spot. And for all you know, the engineer who built this interchange was given divine guidance."

"That's nuts," he said, crossing his arms.

"Oh, yeah? Any nuttier than believing you're one of the lost princes of Atlantis?" I said. "You aren't a real pagan at all. If you believe in the spirit that resides in everything, that means *everything*. Not just the stuff that appeals to you as 'natural.'"

"You're twisting things," he said.

"Oh? Hand-hewed rocks are O.K., but a gravel-silica aggregate isn't? A mountain filled with iron ore can have a spirit, but steel reinforcing rods

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that are the distilled essence of that same mountain can't? Sounds pretty inconsistent to me, Keith."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he said. "Highways and — and *constructed* things — are anathema to everything a pagan loves!"

"Why, you're nothing but a narrow-minded zealot!" I said.

Keith got out of the car and slammed the door. On his fingers. He howled and yanked the door back open, cussing as he cradled the injured fingers with his other hand.

I walked around to his side of the car to see if he was O.K.

"Damn it," he said after a minute. "This stupid piece of junk bites me every time I get near it." He reared back and kicked Mr. Brown's fender just as hard as he could.

I would've killed him, except it wasn't necessary. I think he broke his toe, but I didn't pay much attention to him, for all his hollering and flailing around. I just hunkered down next to Mr. B. and stroked the new chip in his paint.

"Poor thing," I said. "I'll never let him near you again, I swear." I turned around then and said, "Keith, I've changed my mind. I don't want anything to do with you. Someone who mistreats another entity just because he's too blind to recognize spirit in an unexpected place isn't worth my time."

Keith was scowling. "Fine," he said. "And you can forget about joining our coven. But how am I supposed to get home?"

I shrugged. "There's a gas station about a mile up the access road. You can always call a cab."

He cussed some more, but I ignored him, and after a while he limped off. Slowly.

"You O.K., Mr. B.?" I whispered. "I'm real sorry about that."

His engine ticked over with a small sigh, so I figured I was forgiven. But something was nagging at me. I sat down on Mr. Brown's hood. What had I said to Keith? That he was too blind to recognize spirit in an unexpected place? It reminded me of Androcles' message — Karina had said not to be deceived by spirit in an unfamiliar guise.

And she said I would know my familiar by the sign of the crescent moon. I reached down and touched the crescent-shaped dent in Mr. Brown's fender.

"I guess I've been blind too, Mr. B." I said. "But you stuck by me just the same. Thanks for getting rid of that turkey. "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was getting chilly, I noticed, even with the ritual robe over my blue jeans. I looked around the mystical beauty of the interchange and wondered whether anyone else in the world would see it the way I did. So much for finding a community that shared my interests. Didn't look like pagans had any use for a witch who was also a computer nut.

Just then a car came along the access road and pulled off right behind us. I thought for a minute it might be the cops, but it was a graceful white ghost of a car, a Karmann Ghia convertible. I hopped down from Mr. Brown's hood and walked over. "Hey there, Ray," I said. "What are you doing out here?"

He got out of the Ghia. "The spirit calls me sometimes," he said. "This is a special place, you know? Actually," he added as a powder-blue drop-top Corvair coasted to a stop next to us, "some of my friends are getting together here tonight."

A little red Midget with its top down came next, and its bearded driver waved to Ray. These cars weren't show pieces. Just by looking at them, I could see they had character.

"Way cool," I said to Ray. "Are all these folks into witchcraft too? I didn't know anybody else had a car for a familiar. I figured I was just weird."

"Weird in the right way, if you ask me," Ray said, giving me one of his sweet goofy grins. "I'm glad to see you finally figured things out, Angie. I was starting to wonder if you'd ever realize about Mr. B."

"You knew?"

"I thought he had a lot of personality the first time I saw him." His voice dropped to a whisper, and he patted the Ghia. "And then Miranda agreed. I think she's got a little bit of a crush on him."

I took his hand. "I'm not surprised," I said. I could feel my face getting hot, but I said it anyway.

The bearded guy from the MG came up. "Hey, Angie. Ray thought you might turn up here tonight. Welcome to the convertible coven."

"Do sunroofs count?" I said, suddenly nervous.

They laughed. "Of course," Ray said. He tugged on the blue cord of my robe. "And you're dressed just right for the ritual we've got planned tonight — we're going to summon an air elemental to heal the ozone layer."

And we did, and things have been great ever since. Ray's even interested in algorithms. Which isn't surprising, really. After all, this *is* the Age of Aquarius.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Felicity Savage grew up in Ireland, Scotland, and France. She moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts when she was fourteen. She is currently a student at Columbia University in New York City. In 1992, she attended the Clarion Writers Workshop with F&SF regular, Dale Bailey.

"Brixtow White Lady" is Felicity's first fiction sale, and marks her first appearance in print. Since we bought this story, she has sold us several more. She has also sold short fiction to Tomorrow Magazine. *On the last day of her freshman year of college, Roc books purchased her first two novels.*

Brixtow White Lady

By Felicity Savage

BY THE TIME I GOT OFF THE train in Naivasha, I knew that no matter how far I traveled, I could not escape my crime. The squinting yellow houses of Nairobi; the straining, puffing climb up the Kikuyu escarpment; the moment when I looked down into the vast floor of the valley for the first time, and felt my mind stretch, creaking like an overblown balloon. The long journey from Cobh in Ireland, three months of paranoia carrying over from 1923 to '24, lay behind me. No apologetic, lounge-suited fellow had entered my compartment and said, "Excuse me, Lord Dunmanway. I'm from Scotland Yard. If you would answer a few questions..."

The train shuddered to a halt; clouds of steam billowed up outside the window. On the platform, two European men shook hands and slapped each other on the back, delighted to meet again. Friends. How Charles would have relished this moment of arrival! A stab of crippling guilt bit into me, so that I had to hold onto the overhead rail and wait for it to pass.

If I had been hanged, the guilt would no longer plague me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But I do not believe I deserve to die for killing Charles. We were friends for eleven years, bachelors living in a backwater, perfectly suited. Or so I thought. One autumn afternoon as we walked with our dogs in Mallow woods, he confronted me with my secret. We quarreled, I incoherent with fear, he growing furious, until he backed me up against the harebell bank. He pinned my arms with one hand and reached inside my jacket, inside my shirt. His face went red. "My God, Francis! It's true! Will you deny it now?"

"Please," I begged. "Don't tell anyone!"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Anything — I'll do anything, if we can go on the same as before — "

A look I've seen all too often on other men, aimed at some comely young girl, came over his face. "Perhaps there is something." He pressed against me, a heavy physical presence. "I think I could be persuaded not to tell. You make a pretty woman, you know. Perhaps we can be even better friends than before..."

I am not responsible for what happened next. The magic flooded my body. I'd believed it gone: it hadn't stirred since I was thirteen. But now it bloomed and filled me with supernatural strength. I leapt on him, screaming with panic. Thumbs anchored in his nostrils, fingers in his ears, I dragged at his features until they were no longer human. The magic made his flesh like wet clay under my hands. It did not ebb until he lay moving feebly on the crushed harebells, hog-nosed, split-mouthed, blobby trotters coming out of the wrists of his jacket, ears bleeding from the pressure of the changes inside his skull.

I drew back, my joints watery. Unable to bear the bubbling moans that came from his windpipe, I pulled out my pistol and shot him in the head.

Our dogs ripped the remains apart and spread them through the woods.

At the inquest, I testified that I had seen his own hounds turn on him. The dogs were shot. There was no case against me.

But on my return to Dunmanway House, I found my servants fallen away, the whole country rife with suspicion. Hag-ridden, I could neither sleep nor eat. I knew it was folly to stay in Ireland. I wired anyone and everyone who had ever known me or my father. A distant cousin here, an old business acquaintance there.

I chose the most distant of those who replied. Perhaps a new start would help me expunge my guilt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I manhandled my trunk off the train, wrinkling my nose against the smoke and steam. Scantily clad boys clustered around me, touting their services in pidgin English.

"I don't want a porter. Go away, children." I hefted the trunk in my arms. "This is all the baggage I have."

"Go away, go on, this man is with me." A tall, rugged-featured Somali advanced into their midst, scattering them like guinea fowl. Behind him, a European woman gazed vaguely around the platform. Her face was painted as white as a china doll's. She wore a straight, low-waisted dress with a cardigan; a crocodile clasp bag swung from one hand. Extremely unattractive. But then I find women as a species distasteful. It is not their faults, poor things. Society reduces them to their figures and their faces, weighting their every action with sexuality. That is why I chose not to be one.

"Excuse me. Are you here for Robert Bray?" I asked her. I had never met my cousin, or his wife Thalia.

The woman fixed me with faded blue eyes, the pupils pinpoints. "I'm Chantal Voormilt. Are you Lord Dunmanway?" The clasp bag swung rapidly. "Robby isn't here to pick you up because everyone's asleep. We were all horrified when Thalia remembered you were coming this morning. It was a tremendous nuisance. The Robertsons left, after all our efforts to make them stay another week, and the Buckleys went too, because Jennie refused to stay if I was going to be the only other woman. Personally, I *enjoy* having the odds in my favor." She made eyes at me, and continued: "Then Thalia was relieved you were coming, to fill out the dinner table, you know. We were wondering if we would have to drive all the way to the Wanjohi Valley to find company. She insisted I come pick you up."

She obviously did not think she had been rude. I tried to extract the facts from her tirade. "Why...ah...did Jennie leave? I didn't quite — "

"Oh, she came out with it in front of Thalia. I shan't play second fiddle to *you* any longer, she said. Tom and I are going to the Robertsons' house. Did you ever hear such appalling rudeness?"

"What did Thalia think of it?"

"Say what you will of her, the dear girl is a saint. But actually..." Chantal sniggered, a surprisingly boorish sound coming out of that red doll-mouth. "We were at tea. She threw her bread at Jennie's face and called her a Whore of Babylon. Jennie said the pot was calling the kettle black."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My sweet Thalia, Robert had written, *looks forward to your visit as if she were a little girl and you Father Christmas arriving in June. A peerless hostess, she is unhappy unless all her guests are settled comfortably...* I remembered how his writing had wavered across the page.

I shifted the trunk onto one hip and wiped my brow. The train had been hot, but the platform, thick with clouds of steam from the locomotive, was worse.

"What is your Christian name?"

"Francis."

"You poor man, Francis, I'm keeping you standing like a native. How callous of me!" Chantal lashed her bag through the air, narrowly missing the Somali. He took the trunk from my arms and passed it to his personal Kikuyu boy. Chantal led the way out into a cloud of peppery red dust, where cars, drivers, cattle, and urchins wandered. She climbed behind the wheel of a black Buick. "I always drive. Tch-tch. Don't offer. But Abdullah will ride in the back if you want, so you can sit beside me."

In a moment we were underway. The sunshine was surprisingly lenient; the wind rippled through my hair; red dust rolled along the road behind us in sausage-like puffs. Clouds raced above a horizon sharp enough to cut the eye. "What marvelous light!" I shouted, needing to express my unexpected lightheartedness to someone.

"Oh, yes. You should see it when the sun sinks. The air is like honey. Or if you're on safari, and you get up early, and go down to the river to wash your face..." Here she appeared to lose the thread of her sentence. She frowned, wrinkling her porcelain brow, and took one hand off the wheel to massage the opposite forearm. "One P.M., that's early. We usually have pink gins when we get up, and save the whiskies for later. Thalia does a fantastic whiskey sour. Limes and God knows what else she puts in it. What's your poison, Lord Dunmanway?"

Perhaps the altitude was at fault. I found it exhilarating, almost a stimulant. The Aberdare hills were very much like the mountains of Kerry: above the road, the same breathtaking rock formations rose out of the same steep spurs covered with forest. Silver lines arrowed down the escarpment. The clear light transformed the landscape, so that I almost convinced myself the peaks were huddled giants who had slumbered so long trees had grown up over them. Now and again the odor of wood-smoke blew past my nostrils.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But there was no sign of human habitation. "Most of the farming is done in the valley, around Gilgil," said Chantal. "If you live up here, it's a sign that really you can't be bothered with the petty things of life."

The Buick wound higher and higher along a road with a sheer drop on one side. With every foot we climbed, my spirits rose higher.

"It's horrendous in the rain," said Chantal.

We arrived at Brixtow at four. A modest thatched mansion, shaded by jacaranda, hidden away in a cleft of mountain whose walls towered sixty feet and kept out the sun. Chantal brought the Buick to a halt, spraying gravel. I sniffed the air. The scent of mimosa was dizzying. But underneath it, surely that was a lady's perfume?

"She *could* have waited for us. I did want a cocktail," Chantal said, and hurried inside.

I looked around for Robert.

Half a dozen Kikuyus leaned in the various doorways, silent as black marble columns.

Seeing my bemusement, Abdullah got out, stretched his long body, and said: "You may wish to go inside, Lord Dunmanway. Mrs. Bray's room. You will be able to tell which it is."

The lobby was furnished with sofas loose-covered in chintz. Cut-glass trays stood on every available surface, overflowing with cigarette butts. In places the carpet was stained. I passed onto a veranda. The mansion was C-shaped, partially enclosing a courtyard with a fountain: on the far side of the spray, lush dark greenery climbed into the back of the cleft. I tiptoed along the veranda, catching whiffs of tobacco smoke, wine, and vomit. At last I smelt Chantal, and heard male laughter from behind a door. I lifted aside the screen.

"Lord Dunmanway! Francis! Come in." A broad-shouldered fellow with small features and fair hair grasped my shoulder, pulling me into the room. A bathroom. Chantal Voormilt and half a dozen men slumped against the silver fixtures, cocktails in hand, apparently recovering from some hilarious joke. A tub edged with silver and black tiles was sunken into the middle of the floor. Beside it knelt a Somali girl in a red and yellow dress, pouring hot water from a ewer. Thalia — it could be no other — lay with her pale breasts rising from the oiled surface, a gin fizz in one hand, caressing the fox-terrier that sat on the tiles beside her head.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How could I have known that the most striking individual I have ever seen would be hidden away in the depths of Africa?

It does not do her justice to say that she had coils of teak-colored hair, piled above a smooth white forehead; eyes as blue as sapphires dredged up from Lake Victoria; dark crescent moons for brows; a nose as small and neat as any Botticelli Madonna's. But how can one describe beauty except through the minutiae?

I gulped for air, staggered, and sat down on a folding chair that the fair man pushed under me.

"Cousin Robert?" I said weakly.

"That's me." Robert knocked his cigarette on Chantal's sleeve to get her attention. "Chanty, have you heard the latest one that's going the rounds in Nairobi? It's about me and Longly.

There was a young girl of the Mau
Who said she didn't know how.
She went for a cycle with Robby and Michael
She knows all there is to know now.

Isn't that beyond the pale? Don't you adore it?"

I cleared my throat. Thalia looked my way. Meeting her gaze felt like baring oneself to a waterfall — the pounding is bracing, but one knows that before long it will break one down. Her beauty was not only in her features, but in her gracefulness, and the naked appraisal of her gaze. "Are you planning to stay for supper, my lord? Shall I tell the servants to lay another place? Or have you only stopped for a minute?"

"Point well taken, madam." I shrugged out of my coat and hat. "I was planning to stay for several suppers. I haven't long-range plans yet."

"We'll have to see how amusing you can be before we agree to that. None of us at Brixtow wants a bore here. Conviviality is one of the things I demand my guests have. I'm very good at running house parties."

"I'm sure, madam."

"I hate men who condescend!"

"No offense, madam. As for being a bore, I'm afraid I can't discuss art, don't know anything about the classics, can't fly a plane, can't sing, only play the piano, and that not well. Does that disqualify me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh dear, I don't think you will fit in here. Whenever we're not giving each other lessons in Greek and Italian, or talking about our collections of priceless art, we careen around the Aberdares in fighter planes left over from the War."

Her eyes sparkled. I twitched a smile off my face. I did not want to get along with her.

"Well, he has to have a certain absolute value," a stout, red-mustached man said. "Warm body, and all that."

There was a ripple of laughter. I glanced at Robby. He had sunk to the floor beside me, legs crossed awkwardly at the ankles. His tongue protruded from one corner of his mouth; he was in the act of digging a silver syringe into his arm. I looked up. No one seemed to have noticed. If they had, they didn't find it anything out of the ordinary.

"Thallie," Chantal said, "you're a shocking hostess. Your cousin hasn't got anything to drink."

Thalia giggled. "I'm in the bath."

"What difference ought that to make?"

"You know, Chantal, you're quite right. Margot!" Thalia snapped her fingers. The maid came forward, silent and neat-footed between the spills of scented water, and extended a giant Turkish towel. Thalia stood up in the bath, exposing herself down to a triangle of dripping, nutmeg-colored pubic hair. "Get my dress ready. The pink with the silver panniers. Everyone out. Shoo — shoo! Go on! You too, Chantal."

The guests filed out of the bathroom. Red-mustache shut the door behind them. Panic squeezed my gut: I felt the magic stir like a snake inside my body. Since I killed Charles it had made itself felt may times: in a situation like this, I was afraid it would break loose again. Thalia, wrapping a towel about herself African style, squatted beside a marble chest in the corner and mixed me a cocktail. "Here, Lord Dunmanway, is a Brixtow Special White Lady. Savor it."

As she was putting away the bottle, she caught my nervous gaze. One corner of the exquisite mouth tugged upward.

"You leave me speechless, madam," I said.

"I can't get over the way you talk! Fairshante — that' s the fellow who said you were a warm body, I'm not quite sure whether it was a compliment or *not* — " she laughed loudly — "he's Earl of Gloucestershire, so he ought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to sound plummy as anything. But his accent isn't as delicious as yours. Something happened to it since he left Eton."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I didn't go to Eton." Her head tilted in disbelief. "No, I swear it. I grew up alone with my father, on our estate in Southern Ireland."

"Well! I grew up in a little village, and escaped to London as soon as possible. You're very reserved. I suppose that comes of *not* going to Eton. All the boys play with the other little boys, you know, and it creates such an unhealthy atmosphere when it comes to punishment."

She sounded perfectly innocent. But what if the Brays had already judged me by reading the accounts of the Mallow murder case in the papers? The prospect was too awful to contemplate. I forced my voice to its usual tenor. "How much news do you hear from Home?"

"Not much." She made a moue. "Not much at all. And it tends not to be very interesting. I use the papers for the bottom of my parakeets' cages."

She passed into her bedroom, greeted by a flurry of bright little pet birds. I slumped against the wall, loosened my collar, ran my fingers around my hairline to catch the trickles of sweat.

IN MY HEAD, that evening tinkles against my other memories like a glass bauble. The paneled British-style dining room rang with laughter. We were all half drunk before we started eating, Thalia most of all. Because of that, or in spite of it, I found the jokes unusually witty. As a rule I avoid alcohol. Chantal and Sam Voormilt had unforeseen artistic talents. They climbed on the table and did a song and dance routine to the tinny phonograph.

The servers glided in and out with dishes done to a turn. Robby sat out, eating nothing, occasionally volunteering a rude limerick. He was a very heavy morphine user. It cannot have been good for his health.

Williams — an American who was visiting from Boston on the strength of having known Robby ten years ago — seemed the most sensible of the lot. During the fish he said to me, "He's in paradise, you know."

"Who, Robby?"

"That's my theory. We're only *really* happy in our dreams, see, and morphine makes the whole world into a living dream."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you use it?"

He cut a neat slice of marlin. He garnished it with butter, salt and pepper, then put it into his mouth. "There *are* limits. Even in Kenya."

Watching him chew the fish, round head nodding at each bite, I wanted to gag. I excused myself. Chantal was already outside. We retched into the fountain. "That's what it's there for," she said between spasms.

"I should hate to be the servant who has to clean it out."

"That's what *they're* there for."

"What are *we* here for?" I asked, trying to be friendly. I'd winced for her many times during supper. Discussing women's fashions, Thalia had repeatedly used Chantal as a bad example.

"What a deep question." She sat on the rim of the fountain, head silhouetted against the stars at the top of the cleft. The cries of hoopoes and nightjars blended like music, ten, a hundred times more immediate than the wailing of the phonograph from inside the screens. Because I am female, I cannot restrain these poetic fancies: they were one of the clues that led Charles to guess the truth.

"I've thought about it a lot. And I conclude that we have no other purpose on this earth than to provide excitement in Thalia's life." The shingled head bobbed emphatically.

"All of us!"

"She deserves adulation. Anyone who looks like her must. But her women guests usually can't understand that — they waste their time envying her. Whereas the men wait around forever, hoping they will be chosen for the battleground. That's what we call her bed."

"What about you and Sam?"

"Oh — " a mulish toss of the head " — we just come for the dinners."

I knew better in Sam's case, of course, and I believed I knew better about Chantal too.

"Do you know why she didn't send you packing this afternoon, when you acted so dim?"

"Because I've come all the way from Ireland for a visit?"

"Silly! Because she chose you the minute you walked in the door."

My breath caught in my throat. I had forgotten how terrifying the threat of intimate contact was. How the heat stopped, the blood congealed, and prickles ran over the skin under the dinner jacket. I hadn't been so frightened

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

since Charles' attempt at sexual blackmail.

I went inside and had another drink, and another, and another.

"Now, I'm closing my eyes. And when I open them...."

Thalia's hands shuffled busily in her little lacquered bedside table, arranging the room keys in pairs. We waited breathlessly, crowded into her bedroom, clutching our whiskies. "Do you suppose this is how God decides things when there's a war?" said the red-mustached Fairshante. "Odd man out, off to the battleground with you!" He broke out in heavy laughter.

The dark embroidery-silk lashes lifted the tiniest fraction. Thalia placed the last pair of keys. Then she opened her eyes, licked her shining lips, and read out the tags.

"Thalia Bray and Francis Dunmanway."

Well, I had been warned. But that didn't prevent my pulse from racing. Someone slapped me on the back and said I'd been the odds-on favorite.

"Chantal Voormilt and Williams. I've never got round to asking whether you have another name, Willy?"

"Nosir I haven't!" Williams jiggled like a blancmange inside his suit. Clearly he had never been chosen to play the game before. He flicked a glance toward Chantal and said diffidently, "Shall we...?" as if he were asking her to dance.

"What about Sam?" I said.

Chantal advanced with a determined, lurching stride. "Sam doesn't mind. Why should he mind? He'll just stay there until daylight, happy as a sandflea, while you and I, Willy Willy, keep ourselves warm."

We roared with laughter. I don't know why. Perhaps because Sam had passed out in the corner of the dining room with one shoe off and one shoe on.

"Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John," Thalia said pensively. Then she shook herself. "Haven't you kissed her yet, Williams? Come on, play the game! That's better. What's the number on your key? Four? That's on the other side of the courtyard..." Her voice faded as she passed out of the veranda door, herding Williams and Chantal ahead of her, trailing the other men like a string of disappointed ducklings. One of them grinned at me and made an obscene comment as he shut the door.

I took a deep breath. I was alone with twelve sleeping parakeets in a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lady's bedroom.

Charles' voice came to me: *"Women are like dogs, Francie. Can you know what your hound is thinking? You cannot. And a lovely little Pekingese, for example, or a prize spaniel, has even less in its head than an ugly Irish collie. Now, imagine that the Pekingese were able to talk to you! And you have a portrait of any beautiful woman you care to name. My late wife, for example, God rest her soul."* He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and threw another log on the fire. It was Christmas of 1922. Why couldn't I have seen that he already knew my secret — that in his oblique way, he was trying to goad me into revealing myself? If I had understood, the magic might never have been reawakened.

"'Night! Nighty-night! Don't forget, you can always crawl in with each other if you feel lonely, boys!"

"Thallie!" It was Robby's slurred voice. "Wife, come here!"

I startled. I blew out the lamp nearest the window and pressed my hands to the screen, framing the two figures. She stood near the window, graceful even when she was motionless. He circled the fountain toward her, backlit by the lamps on the far veranda. Brute menace was in the set of his shoulders and the swing of his fists. "Thallie, you aren't to go to bed with that man."

"You're being a silly drunk, Robby. It's just a game."

"It's not a game. It's your whole life. Do you know what they call you at the Muthaiga Club? And at every house in the country?" He sneered. "The Whore of Gilgil."

He would have seized her by the shoulders, but she ducked away.

"Please go to bed, Robby." Her voice was shaky. They circled each other. I prayed Robby would succeed in claiming his marital rights: I dreaded her coming. "I'll see you in the morning, darling," she said. "I love you."

"Then come to bed with me!"

"Do you want to know why I don't sleep with you, Robby? Do you really want to know?" Her voice scaled higher. "Because you stink. Your body is pocked with heroin abscesses. You're killing yourself and I wish you would do it faster and get it over with, because I hate you, I hate you, I hate you —"

He rushed at her. With a strangled cry she ducked away and ran. I drew back from the window and she rushed in like a gust of wind, trailing the scent of Chanel and whiskey. She slammed the door, fell against it and burst into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tears.

"Don't take it too seriously," she managed to get out through her sobs. "We have the same fight, this fight, every time he gets drunk. I hate him. I hate him."

Outside, Robby splashed his face in the fountain. Then I heard footsteps staggering away. A door slammed.

"I hate him!"

"Lie down, Thalia." I began edging toward the door. The alcohol had begun to leave my head, and I had cold feet. All I could think about was getting away. "I'll fetch you a drink."

"I don't want a drink." Her gaze burned through the tears. "I want you."

"No, you don't." I was almost at the door. "Will I have to tell you why?"

"To hell with your confessions!" She came at me, pushed me against the column of the four-poster and buried her face in my jacket. "I don't want to know when your mother died, who you first had a pash on, how bloody beautiful I am! They all tell me everything, everything, and I'm so burdened...so burdened...imprisoned.... I just want to fuck you."

She wrenched at her pink satin gloves, hurled one then the other at the parakeet cage. "Don't be shy. We don't expect proper behavior from you — not like at Home. This is the wilderness."

"Wait!" I pulled away. "Don't you know I'm a murderer?"

"Of course I do. Credit me with a little self-interest." She sat down on the bed, picked up one foot and began to peel off the stocking. "We agreed we wouldn't mention the Mallow case to you. It doesn't matter, even if it was rather gory. Everybody who comes to Kenya is running away from something. Why, even Williams, who didn't want to kiss Chantal (not that I blame him), he committed bank fraud back in the States. That's the thing: you're handsome, you're mature, and you *may* or *may not* have killed a man." She snuggled against me, arms snaking around my neck, and kissed me full on the mouth.

A flash flood of sensation rushed through my body. The magic uncoiled and stretched. Terrified, I pushed her away.

Shadow pooled in the hollow of her collarbone as she stretched one arm toward me. The hoopoes cried piercingly on the veranda. Her voice came from deep within her. "Come here."

"You'll be sorry. Just wait and see." I yanked off my jacket. Haste made

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my fingers clumsy. Button by button, I undid my shirt and tugged my vest over my head. Last of all I unknotted the strip of cotton that keeps my breasts flat. Shame suffused my face with heat. "See? You don't want *me* — "

Her eyes were wide, like little cameos, reflecting my nakedness. "Oh my God. How absolutely incredible. But of course..."

"Of *course*?"

"How could I have thought your face belonged to a man? Those cheekbones..." Soft, hot hands fastened on my shoulders. She pushed me back onto the bed. "Those lips..." She kissed me again, for a longer time.

"Stop!" I writhed away, pressing my face into the counterpane.

"What's wrong? Haven't you ever made love to a woman before?" One finger traced up and down my quivering spine. "No, you haven't." Her voice shook a little. "How is this?"

She kneaded my shoulders.

"This?"

"Stop it!"

Her hands ceased to move. "Tell me why you're living like this, Francis."

"My father wanted a son." I found it difficult to concentrate. She bent and kissed my cropped hairline, and her dark locks swung in front of my eyes. "My mother died when I was born, and Father treated me as a boy from the first, although naturally he couldn't send me to public school. We lived alone in the Irish countryside. None of his acquaintances knew I wasn't what he said. And since I didn't have a female nurse, I wasn't sure of the difference myself."

"What happened when you got your monthlies?"

"I didn't know." I shuddered. "My God, I might as well have been turning into an ape! I was so frightened! The servants twigged pretty quickly. One summer day, the son of my father's manservant, a boy my own age, decided to enlighten me as to what I was becoming. That included both of us taking our clothes off. You can guess what the next step was."

"Yes, I think I can."

"You can't possibly."

"He raped you. Poor little Francis, shivering in the summer sun. And ever since, you've been afraid it will happen again. Well, not tonight it won't." She stroked my neck. "Let Thallie make it better."

Eighteen years of deception, holding the magic in, blindly denying it. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

killed the boy, reduced him to bleeding, bubbling jelly. Then I ran weeping to the stream that flowed through the grounds, where I washed myself raw. My father hushed up the boy's death. *Make it better!* I wanted to laugh.

"I like making love to women." Thalia sounded both shy and bitter. "Men call me their goddess, and then they have to own me in order to feel safe. They fight over me like dogs with a bone. And I end up broken into little pieces. That's why I left London. Here, there are few enough men that every jackass knows that if he waits, he'll get his turn."

"Poor Thalia," I said sincerely.

"Don't pity me! Just make me feel the way I make them feel. Make me free." Her weight came down gently on my back. She had taken off her blouse. Her nipples burned spots on my shoulders.

The magic overflowed my body, tossing me from side to side, lifting me off the bed.

Had I ever thought to control it? No. The other times, deep down inside I hadn't *wanted* to control it. Now when I did, I realized the true power of my instincts.

I pinned Thalia down as I had pinned Charles, grasping her face with both hands, and where my fingers pressed her temples the skin was pouring into soft folds, spilling over her hair.

Not again! I won't repeat my crime!

Feverishly I pulled back. I took a deep breath.

The fox-terrier whined at the door; the parakeets chirped plaintively. Far off, a lion coughed.

The border between myself and the outside world had never seemed so breakable. It had never been so important to keep it intact.

I touched my forefinger to Thalia's neat nose and stroked upwards, ever so gently moving skin and cartilage.

She stopped weeping. She lay supine, not struggling, the tendons of her arms spasming from time to time under my knees. Now and again as I re-molded her face, she whimpered with the pain. The jewel-blue eyes overflowed with tears. The water coursed down the sides of her face until I re-formed her ears so that they stuck out far enough to catch it.

"I just wanted to make love to you," she said. Her voice was squeaky, jerky with pain, a far cry from the liquid tones I remembered. "Do I deserve this?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't talk, please. I don't want to hurt you."

"You are hurting me." She jerked. "Rather badly."

"Can't stop now." I touched her eyelashes, teased them until they were dirty brown, and moved on to the roots of her hair. The parakeets screeched, filling the room with their racuous voices. The power surged like a flood tide. "I'm trying not to do any damage. I think — I hope — you'll thank me for this."

"*Thank* you?"

"Please be quiet. It's too late to stop now."

I GOT UP at four in the morning and packed the Buick with things I thought we might need: clothes, food, money. Then I woke Thalia into her new life. She only cried a little before she conceded there was no question of staying at Brixtow any longer. We drove several miles up the road before we felt safe enough to stop and have breakfast. Fresh rolls, cold salmon, papaya, and fresh-roasted Kenyan coffee made short work of our hangovers. My hunger distracted me from the real question at hand: where were we to go now? I ate, and ate, and looked out over the tops of the mimosa trees into the hazy blue basin.

"I feel sorry for Robby," Thalia said. She sat on the patch of grass we'd flattened, wearing a dowdy skirt and blouse. Dirty-porridge waves spilled to her shoulders, and her hairline was low to her eyebrows. She had light brown eyes with stubby lashes, wide and frank. A snub nose. Her mouth was too wide, her lips too thin for beauty. Her jaw looked almost masculine. This was what I'd done to her. "He won't realize this is for his good. At least, not when he crawls out of bed and finds me gone. Maybe a few months down the road. I ruined him."

"It wasn't your fault."

"He couldn't give me the freedom I wanted. So I took it. He couldn't bear that either, so he turned to morphine. And now I look back on our life, I see I wasn't even free."

"Every woman is under *some* man's thumb."

"It's easy for you to make pronouncements, Francis... Did you ever think of having a go at it yourself? Being a woman, and refusing to be imprisoned?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No. Not really."

"Then perhaps you ought to try it now. What have you got to lose?"

"Everything!"

"Nothing. Anyway, I think you owe it to me. Oughtn't you to alter *yourself* as drastically as you altered me? Even if by more mundane means?" She tugged on a strand of mousy hair, touched her new, heavy eyebrows.

I bowed my head. "I do owe you that."

She stood. "We can find out how you would look, at any rate. Come down to the car. I saw you put plenty of my clothes in, and we're practically the same height."

We walked down to the car. She rooted in her trunk. "A sea-green blouse and a linen skirt?" I said incredulously.

"That's right. You can change behind that thorn tree."

It is astonishing what a difference clothes make to one's self-image. I felt naked, uncertain, shy, yet at the same time deliciously free, the way I used to feel at night when I would take my breast band off. The thorn tree was in flower. Daringly I picked a spray of blossom and tucked it behind my ear, breathing in the heavy scent.

"Oh Francie!" Thalia clapped her hands. Then she came forward and adjusted the flower so that it bobbed in front of one eye. "When your hair grows a bit longer, you can get a perm. You'll be at the height of fashion. I'm terribly out of date with my long hair."

I had never expected to feel this free. Impulsively, I leaned forward and kissed her. She stopped me. "Don't."

"You mean, you only ever make love to people once? Are you afraid of getting any closer?"

"I didn't say that." There was a pause, then she said, "I thought we would go back to London."

"I see. It's because I'm a woman. And that's not acceptable." On the other side of the grass, in the thorn bushes, I heard water rushing. Crimson and blue and green birds flirted across the sky, and just above the grass, insect wings flashed. I never wanted to leave this country. "I'm older than you, Thalia," I said, "and I've had time to become disenchanted with human nature. For a man, living in Britain was bearable. I stayed on my estate, scarcely speaking to a soul. For a woman, society's biases would be intolerable. We couldn't even be ourselves, never mind being with each

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other."

"I've been in Kenya too long," she said. "Europe is the place to be. If not London, then Paris or Venice. This is the age of freedom. Women are treated with equality."

"Oh, if you only knew!" We had reached the Buick again. I leaned my elbows on the bonnet, facing out into the valley. "No woman knows what she's being cheated of until she has had it. And now I'm giving it up, I don't want the loss rubbed in my face."

"You're wrong." Tears shone in her eyes. "The only thing that imprisoned me was my beauty."

"I won't go back." My voice was steady. I could not believe what I was about to say. "Maybe we should part. I'm not sure we're suited."

"No, Francis!" She hugged me. We stood pressed together in the middle of the road, hip to hip, breast to breast. In light of the sensation that prickled through my body, I realized that it made sense not to kiss her. Too many other tensions would come into play. In a sexual relationship, we would end up hating each other. We had to find solid ground to stand on before we could reprise last night. Yet I didn't want to eliminate the possibility, as we would have to in a society that called it taboo.

"I don't think I can stand to give up civilization," she said.

I laughed. "I've given up on civilization."

"This may sound hypocritical — but I don't want to give you up." Her heart beat fast. I chewed my lip, trembling with fear. I knew that as we stood, unembarrassed in our true forms, we didn't belong in the world of men. But how could I make Thalia see?

"Please come back to London!" she said. "You can't not give it a try!"

Over her shoulder, the bend in the road beckoned to me, green-shadowed, awash with dapples of sunlight. I started to speak.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carolyn Ives Gilman makes her home in St. Louis, where she works as the Director for Exhibitions and Design for the Missouri Historical Society. Her most recent cover story for F&SF, *"The Honeycrafters," (Oct/Nov 1992) was a Nebula finalist. "The Wild Ships of Fairny" has also inspired a cover. This story is set in the same world as Carolyn's fantasy novel,* Haven.

The Wild Ships Of Fairny

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

"MARRY ME!" JUMBER SHOUTED as soon as his boat was in earshot.

Larkin shook her head and turned to pound more caulking into a crevice in *Kittiwake's* deck. She had come out to work on her boat when the uncles had spotted a sail on the horizon. She had known it would have to be Jumber. No one else would come to Fairny this early in the year, when the sea hadn't yet thrown off its winter melancholy.

"Marry me!" he yelled again, apparently thinking she hadn't heard. He was practically standing on the bowsprit, clutching a forestay. A pink knit sweater stretched across his rotund torso, and a visored cap hid the thinning patch in his black hair. He had a bushy mustache and eyes crinkled from squinting into the sun. Larkin noted enviously that his boat was in even better repair than last year; painted green and red with shiny brass fittings, she was the brightest thing Fairny Bay had seen all winter. Larkin resolved to ask Jumber to bring some paint for *Kittiwake* next time he came, even if it meant doing without new boots.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You boat abuser!" she yelled back. "You're risking *Bobber's* life, taking her out this early."

"It was love. So shoot me," he said. Then, to his crew, "Come about, you rotting turds! Where's the hawser? Do I have to do the whole blistering thing myself?"

Bobber nosed neatly in to the tumbledown dock where the great Fairny fleet had once moored. Jumber had two crewmen this year, Larkin saw. He had prospered. Back in Soris, the women were probably lined up to catch his eye. Inland women were like that.

The trader would have jumped onto the sagging gray dock, but stopped when another person emerged from *Bobber's* hatch. He was a strange sight, swathed in a furry greatcoat. His long black hair fell about his shoulders; his close-cropped black beard was shaved away in comma-shaped sworls down his cheeks. He looked around at the empty bay, the bare hills, then the line of gray, leaning shacks that was the village. His brows contracted. "You have cheat me!" he cried shrilly.

"No, your honor, this is Fairny," Jumber said.

"You gregious Torna, this is lie!" the man insisted. "Where are sheeps?"

"Oh, not again," Jumber said with overtaxed patience. "Listen, I told you there wasn't much here. You could have gotten your sheep much closer to Soris — didn't I say that?"

The foreigner looked around. "There *are* no sheep!"

"They're out in the hills," Jumber said.

"What?" the foreigner said, looking startled.

Jumber gestured toward the windy grassland behind the village. "Out grazing. In the pastures. That's where the sheep are."

"You think I am numbskull?" the man said angrily.

"Why does he want sheep?" Larkin asked, resting her arms on *Kittiwake's* gunwale rail.

The foreigner's attention was diverted. He gave her a deep bow. "Pardons, precious lady. I am distract. I am dupe of salty schemer. I came on search for Fairny, where great sheep are build."

Larkin saw the problem. "Oh, you mean *sheeps!*" she said.

"Yes, yes," the foreigner said excitedly. "Big ones, that walk on water. Boom-boom."

"*What?*" Jumber said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Kind lady, can you tell where is Fairny of the sheep?"

"This is it," Larkin said.

The man looked incredulous. "Am I dream? There are no tree, no boatyard."

"You're fifty years too late," Larkin said, hearing in her own voice the trace of leaden bitterness that infected everyone in Fairny when they spoke of the time of ships. "We don't have ships anymore. Not to sell, not to sail. They're gone."

The man first looked puzzled, then crafty. "I think you pull my foot," he said. "You think I have not riches enough."

"No, there just aren't any ships. No more."

She turned back to her work, not wanting to face more questions. She ran her fingers down the smooth wood of *Kittiwake's* deck, weathered to the silver of a dragonfly's wing. *Kittiwake* was a handy little craft, agile on a close reach, well suited to shellfishing; but she was a far cry from the legendary vessels that had once made Fairny famous.

They had been ships that no one who saw could forget. *Mist*, in which Gennaday of Rusk had sailed into the other circles; great *Havenmaker*, which Ison Gavro himself had led against the Torna usurpers. Their names were thick in the winter tales the uncles told at fireside. All through the thousand isles of Haven they had been famous. In those days mankind had ruled the land, but Fairny's ships had ruled the Widewater.

Larkin had been born in Fairny, but she had never seen one of the great ships—not by daylight, at least. They had come to her in dreams, so beautiful she would wake with her throat aching. Tall and slim, white canvas-winged, rigging singing like harp strings in the wind, they always passed a little beyond reach in her dreams—just as they had passed across Fairny's horizon. Now all that was left of them was a slow wake of memories.

Over the banging of her mallet she could hear a loud argument going on in *Bobber* — the stranger's voice shrill with indignation over something, Jumber shouting back in his demonstrative Torna way. Larkin wondered as she worked if she could ever marry a man who loved an argument so.

Presently the shouting ceased and footsteps approached across the dock. "Permission to board?" Jumber's voice said.

Larkin sat back on her heels, pushing a curl of dark hair out of her eyes. Jumber was grinning at his double entendre. His laughter was part of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spring to Larkin, like the meadow flowers and the nesting guillemots. It was always jarring at first, for each fall when the traders left, the village lapsed into a long silence; as the days dwindled Larkin grew accustomed to communicating in monosyllables with people who no longer had anything to say to each other. And then Jumber's laughter would come again, brassily shattering the comfortable monotony of grayness and decay.

"I thought one of those inland women would have gotten you by now," Larkin said.

"Worried?" he asked. She snorted in answer, but realized that she *had* been a little worried: that Jumber's boat wouldn't come again, that springtime would never return.

"It was a long winter," she said. "Old Father Gort died just before solstice, Mother Bira just after."

"That's all I ever hear in the spring," Jumber said. "Who died."

"It's all that happens here."

"You don't belong here," Jumber said.

Larkin shrugged, still unused to navigating by word. She would never be as good a talker as Jumber. He was Toma; they were all born talking.

"The aunties say I'm turning into a seawife," she said.

"A what?"

"You know, a woman married to her boat. Maybe they don't have them where you come from."

"No." He held out a hand. "Come on over to *Bobber*. I brought something for you."

Larkin looked at him hopefully. "Paint?"

"What do you mean, paint?" Jumber protested. "What kind of suitor do you think I am?"

"*Kittiwake* needs it," Larkin said. "Just look at her. Gray as driftwood."

"Forget the damn boat," Jumber said with mock irritation; then, seeing how Larkin frowned, he held up his hands and said, "All right, I'll bring paint next time. Just let me give *you* something first. After all, I don't want to marry the boat."

Larkin was about to step onto the dock when Jumber's crewmen emerged from *Bobber's* hold hefting a huge, brass-bound trunk between them. The black-haired stranger followed, berating them incoherently and waving his hands.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who *is* that?" Larkin whispered.

"Some crazy mainlander," Jumber answered, then laughed. "Would you believe all this time I thought he was talking about sheep?"

Stranger, crewmen, and trunk set off in a wobbling procession down the dock. Already half the village was standing at their doors or peering from windows at the sight.

"Come on," Jumber said.

Bobber's hold was crammed full of casks, bales, and crates that smelled of sawdust packing and cinnamon. He threaded his way through a tiny passage, ducking where the beams swooped low, into a little cabin they all had shared on the trip out. He pulled a black sea-chest from under his berth.

"Ready?" he said. Then, with a flourish, he brought them out: a pair of tall leather boots, intricately tooled. Larkin took them to the porthole to examine. They were polished on the outside to a rich cherry-wood color, and lined on the inside with chamois soft as felt. She ran a finger over them in awe. She had never owned anything so lovely; for a moment she hated her poverty.

"They're beautiful," she said. "Too beautiful to wear on the boat. I'd ruin them."

"You could wear them in Soris," Jumber said. "You could wear anything you wanted there."

Larkin wanted to believe it, but couldn't. In Soris, she would have appearances to keep up. Everyone would be watching to see if she was just a savage outlander.

She put one arm around Jumber's bulk and kissed him on the cheek, clutching the boots in the other arm. He was watching her expectantly; he hoped for something in return. Not sex; he knew he'd have that anyway. He wanted a commitment. And that was just the thing Larkin couldn't bear to give.

She made a dash for the door then, hugging the boots tight. Through the tunnel of cargo she ran, up the companion ladder into the sunlight, and across the dock to *Kittiwake.* With a single movement she tossed the boots on deck and unlooped the mooring lines. Jumping aboard, she seized the boathook and pushed off, then scrambled to the mainmast and yanked at the halyard. The sheave at the mast top screeched unwillingly, but the sail climbed and caught the wind. Larkin hurried aft, catching up the sheet and tiller. Then, like a musician teasing the perfect note out of the tension of opposing forces,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she made *Kittiwake* swoop away from the dock and out into the bay.

She stood there as the boat bucked across the choppy waves, trying to think only of the strain of the line in one hand and the balancing tug of the tiller in the other. For a while she played on them, feeling *Kittiwake* respond to each little adjustment. She could almost imagine the boat was waking under her hands, freed after the long winter ashore. If only it were true.

At the mouth of the bay the sharp cool of the ocean wind hit them; *Kittiwake* heeled over, water bubbling past her hull. The lines creaked, stretching taut. As a sheet of cold spray leaped skyward from the bow, Larkin laughed aloud, feeling the wind in her teeth. She braced her feet apart and rode the tossing deck.

This is where I belong, she thought. Not in Soris, among all those people with their landlocked minds. And not in Fairny either, where everyone lost their will to live when the ships left.

In Fairny Bay the sea had been indecisive, the waves just flopping around; but out here they were hurrying west as if they knew something. Larkin sniffed the wind and squinted across the gray landscape, trying to gauge the sea's mood. It was a fretful time of year. The sea had a preoccupied look, as if something were afoot.

She cleated the sheet loosely and secured the tiller in its collar, then went below to fetch the carved wooden box that held her dreamweed. She stood on the foredeck to toss a spring gift to the horned panther whose realm lay below the sea. A wave bared foamy teeth and swallowed the offering whole.

She stooped and picked up the boots she had tossed on deck. They were already spotted with salt water; she spit on them and tried to rub it off. Then she carried them back and stood with the tiller under one arm, the boots under the other.

Jumber's offer was the best chance she would ever have to escape this desolate island and the village that had been dying as long as she had been alive. Over the winter she had constructed a mental image of what her life would be like. Jumber would prosper — there was little doubt of that. He would soon buy a bigger boat, and then a few more, and at last he would become a merchant with a fleet, like the ones in Tornabay. He would grow stout and solid, and probably she would too — for there would be children, enough to fill a bright, noisy houseful. It would be a good life, secure and happy. They would be leading citizens of Soris someday. She would gradually

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forget what it was like to live on haunted ground, always in the shadow of a lost past.

And she would never go to sea again.

She steered *Kittiwake* into the wind and went forward to raise the jib. When the big sail billowed out the little boat heeled till the lee rail was scraping the waves. Larkin leaned on the tiller with a whoop of exhilaration. As if sharing her mood, *Kittiwake* leaped forward, her bow shooting free into air, then crashing down again in spray.

It was getting on toward evening when Larkin came back into Fairny Bay. She was in a quieter mood, but no more decided than when she had set out. Whatever course she took, change was ahead.

"Where have you been?" Auntie Broll said when Larkin came into the small cottage, boots and tackle slung over her shoulder.

"Out," Larkin said.

"In that boat of yours?"

"Mmm." Larkin went to the stove to see what was cooking; she was ravenously hungry.

"Don't you touch anything you didn't fix," Auntie said. She was cooking sweetroots, hoarded like jewels over the winter.

"Is Jumber coming?" Larkin asked. Auntie doted on Jumber; he always brought out her rare moods of extravagance.

"Yes, if we can set a table that won't shame us."

"As if he didn't have enough to eat," Larkin said.

In the warm corner behind the stove sat Mother Keer, hunched and frail, in her wide-armed chair. When Larkin came over a radiant smile lit her face and she held out a bony, age-spotted hand.

"How are you today, Mother?" Larkin asked.

"She's had the trots all day long," Auntie Broll said. Mother pursed her lips and shook her head at the way Auntie talked.

"Are you better now, Mother?"

"She's just going to have some broth for supper, isn't that right?" Auntie said.

Mother Keer gripped Larkin's hand and said reedily, "Jumber's coming."

"Yes, I know."

"Have you married him yet?" Mother Keer asked, as if it were something she might have missed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No. You'll know if I do."

Auntie Broll was rearranging the furniture with loud, purposeful thumps. "I wish you'd hurry up and do it. You wouldn't need to be eating mutton and oatmeal all winter long." Larkin heard the unsaid words: *my* mutton, *my* oatmeal.

"Your mother could have had an inland man," Mother Keer said.

"Yes, I know," Larkin said. She had heard the story at least four thousand times.

"She turned him down," Mother Keer said, then added — as Larkin recited the often-heard words under her breath — "and regretted it the rest of her life."

"I'm going to wash up," Larkin said. "I'll be back to help."

When Jumber arrived, he brought his foreign passenger with him. Auntie Broll pretended to be honored at hosting someone who had come all the way from the mainland, but was privately frantic at the impression her simple fare would make. She kept whispering to Larkin, "I don't care what he thinks. This is how we live. I'm too old to be putting on a show for guests."

Fortunately, the stranger flirted and flattered her in outrageously broken language, and she gradually relaxed. After dinner, Larkin stoked up the cast-iron stove with peat and lit the oil lamps so that the tiny cottage seemed cozy and companionable. In the lulls of conversation they could hear the crash of waves against the shore and the wind tugging and prying at the shutters. "The Ashwin are in the air tonight," Mother Keer said.

Soon the uncles started to arrive, curious to have a look at the foreigner. They took up seats on every chest, stool, and window sill, but left the chairs on either side of the stranger vacant.

The room was already full when Larkin looked up to see her brother Runar at the door. She nearly called out; she had scarcely seen him in a month. But the greeting fled her mind as she saw the unkempt mats in his black hair, the clothes that looked like they had been his bedding for many nights. His eyes were deep sunk in shadow under his prominent brows; he glanced around as if he were a trespasser.

The stranger was talking again on his old subject of "sheeps." It was clear he suspected some conspiratorial ruse at work around him, for he wheedled them to reveal all they would. And in a way he was right: for though the uncles would talk and talk again about the ships of their childhood, they were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strangely reticent about crucial threads of information. There were just some things too close to the heart for words.

"*Havenmaker* came from Fairny, you know," Uncle Bosk said. "She was a grand ship, like a floating fort. She had tall fore- and aftercastles, all carved with gilded seadogs. *Havenmaker* never lost an engagement when she could come alongside the enemy. The only reason she lost was that the Torna had cannons."

Jumber said good-naturedly to the stranger, "They still think that was cheating."

"She had eighteen sails," Uncle Stole put in.

"No, seventeen," Bosk said. "I ought to know, it was my great-granduncle who brought her in."

"Well, my cousin's grandfather sailed in her," Stole maintained, "and she had nine square sails, seven staysails, a jib — "

"Right," Bosk said, keeping track on his fingers. "That's seventeen."

"— and a spritsail."

"Oh yes. I forgot the spritsail."

They could go on all night, debating the details of a hundred bygone ships, and whose family had delivered each one. But no one in the room seemed bored; even the stranger was listening attentively. As Larkin scanned their faces, her eyes kept returning to Runar, standing near the door where the light from one of the lamps carved sharp lines across his cheekbones and jaw. He didn't see her; he was too absorbed in what the old men were saying. His weather-browned face was intense with interest, and a kind of longing. Larkin remembered what Auntie Broll's dead husband used to say: "That boy was meant to be a shiphunter."

He had been born on the Night of the Naked Bear, and the shadow of it had always followed him. As a child he had been a dreamer and a loner, Larkin his only real friend. Even then he had felt the world's injustice more keenly than most. But lately, moods of black depression had been growing on him. He would leave the village for weeks on end, tramping out on the hills, living like a bear in the wind and rain. It had been hard for Larkin to accept that there was nothing she could do about it. Now, as she watched him listen to the ship-talk, it struck her that he looked happier than she had seen him in months.

"I helped my brother deliver a ship all the way to Tornabay once, when

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I was nineteen," Father Orch was saying. "Her hull was low and sleek as an otter, but her mainmast nearly scraped the clouds. She had as many acres of sail as most farmers have of crops. Under all plain sail, she nearly flew: we hit twenty knots on the Windward Passage. We called her *Rosalbin.* When we cast anchor at Tornabay the harbormaster said we'd have to move her or no business would get done on the waterfront. Everyone was just standing on the docks, watching her. They'd never seen a ship so beautiful."

From his eyes, they could all see how beautiful she had been; she had left a scar of loss in him, still visible after all these years.

"And what did you get for her?" the stranger asked.

Father Orch looked down, and everyone was silent, for the ships had been like Fairny's soul.

"Yes, we sold her," Orch said. He looked up. "Fairny was a prosperous place then, not like you see today. Hundreds lived here, and we lived well, all because of the ships. Our homes had carpets and mirrors, and we ate beef all winter long."

"You could again," the stranger said. "I give as much as you get then. More. You give ten sheep, I still pay same."

The uncles shook their heads silently.

"You think you cannot make sheep now," the stranger said slyly. "You think, 'Silly stranger, can he not see sheep impossible? We have cut down trees.'"

Everyone stared at him uncomprehending. He laughed. "You see, I am not numbskull. I know you must have wood for mast and hull, and pitch for seal the joint-holes. You think all such is gone. But tree is many other place. I take you there. Or if not, I bring forest here. Then you have sheep again."

If only it were that easy. The uncles sat silent. How could they explain to a mainlander?

From near the doorway a grating voice came. "Just tell him."

It was Runar. He was standing, arms crossed, surveying the uncles with a judgmental frown. Larkin gave him a signal of caution, but he barged on: "Go on, say it. You never built a ship in your lives."

"That brother of yours!" Auntie Broll hissed in Larkin's ear.

His voice rose. "The ships of the olden days weren't dead and manmade things, like the boats we have today. They were the real thing. They used to come past in great herds, migrating north for the summer. Each spring you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would go out to catch them. You would tame them, and tether them, and bring them back to live out lives of servitude to humans. Their spirits died when you brought them back, but that didn't stop you. You sailed their empty shells." His scowl darkened as he scanned the uncles' faces turned to him, speechless. "You thought they would never grow less, no matter how many you took. And every year your greed grew, and you caught more, and finally the herd dwindled away. So that you could have carpets and beef you took everything, and left your children nothing. Now your grandchildren have never even seen a ship alive, except in your stories."

For a moment the room was utterly silent. Then everyone began speaking at once. Uncle Bosk stood, red-faced, to shout at Runar through the sudden pandemonium. "Get out of here, you mother's blunder, and stop talking of things you know nothing about!"

Runar had begun to shout back when Larkin grasped his arm. "Come here," she said firmly.

He let her drag him out the door. When she had closed it behind them and they stood in the cold, biting wind, they could still hear the unsettled voices inside.

"What do you want?" he said angrily at her.

Her mind was racing. "Runar, I've got an idea," she said.

"Those old fools," he said, making a combative movement as if to go back in. She blocked his way.

"Runar, how do we *know* the ships are all gone?"

He stared at her with madly gleaming eyes. "They all say — "

"That's just it. All we have is their word on it. Fifty years old."

"You're crazy," he said.

"I don't want to take their word for it. I want to see for myself. It's the right time of year, Runar: just when the hunters would have gone out in the old days. What do you say?"

"There aren't any ships there."

"Then we'll come back."

"And everyone will laugh at us."

"So what?"

"No!" Runar said. "I don't have a boat."

"We have *Kittiwake.*"

"She's your boat. I wouldn't go unless I was captain of my own."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She knew that expression: it was his irrational stubborn streak. It stood in between him and all the things he really wanted, all the things that were good for him. There would be no budging him. "I'll find a boat for you, then," she said.

"Who would lend me a boat?" His voice was mocking.

"I'll find someone." She would have to. When she had started talking it had just been something to distract him, to keep him from going back inside. Now the idea was flaming in her. She wanted to go, and wanted him to go with her, before they grew so far apart they could not touch anymore. They had played at hunting ships when they were children. Now she wanted to do the real thing, to prove they were still the same people, to make continuity amid all the change.

"We'd need crews," he said.

"I can think of half a dozen who would come."

"No old ones," he warned.

"No. Just people our age."

The idea had finally caught him, as it had caught her. He began to talk about supplies, and timing. Then he suddenly looked at her, with the wind blowing his hair back, and said, "What would we do if there *were* ships out there?"

"Are you crazy?" Larkin said. "Didn't you hear what that mainlander is offering? You could buy a dozen boats. You could buy the whole village."

He slowly smiled. "What would those old gull-baits think of that?"

"This whole place would come to life again," Larkin said. "We'd have a town here, not a cemetery." Inside her, a voice added, *And I wouldn't have to leave.*

That last thought was not part of what she told Jumber that night as they snuggled together under a mound of woolen blankets in Auntie Broll's loft. In fact, she was very careful what she told him; but he still sat bolt upright and said, "Do I look like a lunatic?"

She pulled him back down, for the air was cold and he was letting it all in. "It would only be for a day or two," she said. "Runar would take good care of her."

"*Bobber's* my living," he said. "I don't lend her to anyone. No one. Not my own brother."

"Runar would be your brother, you know, if..." She let that hang. "He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

needs it, Jumber. He's had a bad time. This will be a healing thing for him. I just know it."

"I can't do it," Jumber said. "She's all laden, for one thing."

"You wouldn't have to take it all out. Just enough to make her faster; leave the rest for ballast."

Jumber sat up again. "You've got it all thought out, haven't you? You *do* think I'm a lunatic."

When Larkin pulled him back this time she crawled on top of him to pin him down. "I just thought you'd want to help us out," she said. "Like family."

"No," he said.

She bent down to kiss him.

"Never," he said.

WHEN HER crew came aboard, shouldering their duffel bags, Larkin watched with a frown to make sure no one was smuggling aboard any forbidden things. No compass or chronometer, no sextant or chart could be taken shiphunting. The uncles all agreed: there was no way to find the ships but by setting a course on trust. "If you know where you are, you won't be in the right place," they said.

Across the dock, Runar was making *Bobber* ready to sail. He looked like a wild man with his shaggy black hair all windblown; but there was a quiet concentration in the way he checked every detail of the rigging, like a craftsman at work. Watching him, Larkin couldn't help but feel a deep glow of satisfaction at what she had done.

"Ready?" she called.

"I have one more person coming," Runar said.

They had found nine crew members. Five would go on *Kittiwake;* for though she was smaller, she was also faster and more likely to make a catch, if any were there to be made.

Larkin scanned the shore for the missing crew member and saw there only a stocky figure staring glumly at them, mustache adroop. Jumber. She waved gaily. He put his hands in his pockets. With a glance to make sure everything was ready, she leaped onto the dock and ran shoreward.

"I'm out of my mind," he said when she came up.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing will happen to *Bobber*. We'll be back in two days, I promise. Three at the most. Runar's a good sailor; he'll take care of her."

Jumber looked at his feet. "I wish it was only *Bobber* that I was worried about."

So he understood more than she had told him. He'd seen that she was smelling the fresh air of freedom. She had wheedled him into becoming her accomplice in a mad bid to escape all he offered. With a rush of warmth, she kissed his rough cheek. "I love you for this," she said.

"Will I ever know where I stand with you?" he asked.

She would gladly have told him, if she had known.

Runar's last crew member came rushing toward the dock. "I've got to go," she said. "Maybe I'll bring you back a ship." She turned and fled then, back to *Kittiwake*.

"Ready to cast off!" she called out to her crew. "Stand by the halyard!" It seemed a little absurd to give orders on such a small boat, but the make-believe was irresistible. Her crew grinned good-naturedly at her and she could tell their hearts were as high as hers.

They had to tack out of the bay, for the wind was south and west. Once clear of Croggan Head, the full brunt of it met them, fresh enough to make the sinuses ache. They came about in a flurry of spray and set course westward toward the Faraway Islands. *Kittiwake* went first, prancing over the waves; *Bobber* followed, rolling and portly; her broad cargo hull made her look a little pregnant. She towed the small dinghy they would use for bait.

It was the females they were after, for those were the ships that had once migrated in herds that covered the sea. The males roamed solitary out on the untracked ocean, joining the females only for a mating season each spring and fall. It would have been possible to catch a male ship during mating, but no one in Fairny had ever tried; they were combative vessels unfit for taming. The females were easier to catch and train, especially this time of year when they were raising their dinghies and gigs. It was why all true ships were called "she."

They sighted the Faraways on the northern horizon late in the afternoon. No one wanted to stop there; they were just barren rocks where the seals and birds mated, inhabited by strange, savage folk who lived in round stone houses sunk in the earth. They believed their hearthfires were the direct descendants of a flame that had been carried in a gem from sunken Alta six

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

centuries ago. News from Fairny would mean nothing to them.

It was unnerving to set the tiller in its notch and watch the night fall with sails still pulling hard. But there was no risk in it; beyond the Faraways the islands ended. Only open sea lay ahead.

Cory, one of Larkin's crew, had brought a fiddle. After dinner they all sat below in the warm lamplight, singing and stomping to the old reels and hornpipes, as *Kittiwake's* motion rolled them rhythmically side to side. Content, Larkin looked from face to face. Cory gave her a freckled, large-toothed grin over the bow of the fiddle. Brill was stretching out his long legs with an air of cool sarcasm it was easy to see through; Gimble, the youngest of them, was foot-wrestling with her brother Gorran, a genial giant of a man with a mop of brown hair.

It was late when Larkin went out on deck to relieve quiet Bedwa, the woman she had left on watch. The world was pitchy black — no horizon, no sky, only the occasional polished black gleam of a wave lit by the lanterns at *Kittiwake's* mast and bowsprit. Far aft, *Bobber's* lanterns gleamed yellow, points suspended in the dark. Larkin sat listening to the muffled fiddle music from below, and the enormous breathing of the sea.

It was a pearly dawn. *Kittiwake* was still pulling west when they gathered on the frosty deck in mittens and knit caps, their breath steaming in the air. The eastern sky changed slowly from mauve to azure to a clear, waterwashed blue. When the light reached the west they stared — for a solid bank of fog lay ahead, hugging the sea. Its low, rolling contours, touched pink by the rising sun, looked for all the world like the hills and valleys of a mystic coastline.

Larkin felt very far away from home. She gazed at the gray ghost-land ahead, and felt instinctively that what she saw was a boundary. Once she passed it, there would be no retracing her steps, for in such places lay transformation. She shivered, for the risk was like the cold: chilling and exhilarating at once. Only for a moment did she feel a twinge of sorrow for Jumber.

They took in the jib to slow the boat down, and signaled *Bobber* to come alongside. When they were yards apart, Larkin called to Runar, "We'd better stay close. Hang out some lanterns."

Runar gave a nod and turned to look ahead at the fog. There was something incandescent in his face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As they drew closer, the gray coastline came sharper into view. It almost looked as if they might land to walk over one of those billowy hillsides into the sky.

But there was no edge to it, no shore. Larkin stood on the foredeck as *Kittiwake* merged with the mist, and a shadow fell across the deck. A clammy wisp of fog brushed her face. For a while, looking astern, she could see the glow of daylight where they had entered. But as they continued on, ever deeper, the light grew dim and soon all was uniform gray, no feature anywhere to distinguish forward from behind.

Larkin joined the others sitting in the cockpit. They were silent, for the close air made words sound odd and flat. At first it was easy to see the worry on their faces; but soon even that grew blurry. Thicker and thicker the gray flannel muffled them, damply stifling, as if *Kittiwake* were a trinket being wrapped in batting to be stored away.

All they could see of *Bobber* was the dim glow of her stern lamps on their starboard bow. Larkin sent Gimble forward to conn, worried that they might either lose their companion or ram into her. She had expected the wind to die once they were inside the fog, but *Kittiwake* moved steadily forward — or so it seemed from the vibration of the hull and the feel of the tiller when she took it. For all her eyes told her, they could have been standing stock still.

"How long do you suppose this goes on?" Gorran muttered.

"We could be going in circles," Brill answered. "If we'd brought a compass, we might know."

Larkin ignored them. It did feel like a long time had passed, but it was impossible to gauge in that world without sun or sky. For a while she tried counting her own pulse beats, but they seemed to be growing abnormally slow. She had been following the dim dot of *Bobber's* light so long that her strained eyes began to play tricks. The light would fade, then appear again a little to starboard; then phantom lights began to dot the fog. She blinked and rubbed her eyes.

"Run forward and hail them, will you?" she said to Cory. "We're going to lose them unless we do something."

Soon she heard Cory's voice calling, "Ahoy, *Bobber!*" The heavy silence recoiled, disturbed.

The answer that came was unaccountably far away and off to port. Larkin hesitated, then altered course; the light she had been following faded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from view. "Call again," she said.

Again the answer had drifted portward. Frowning, Larkin pushed the tiller even farther from their old course. Off somewhere in the fog, there was a muffled series of shouts, then silence.

"There they are!" someone said. Indistinctly in the mist ahead they glimpsed the curve of a gray sail, and a trellised mast. The next moment it was gone. "Mirage," Larkin said. "Not really there." But she wondered. Was it only her own desire forming images on the mist? She could swear it had been a square rigger.

On their port beam a spot of light was swinging to and fro in an arc. Larkin was about to change course to chase it when the black shape of *Bobber's* hull suddenly loomed out of the mist, too near. She slammed the tiller over to avoid colliding.

"Ahoy, *Kittiwake!*" It was Runar swinging the lamp. He now held it up high. "Where did you get to? We thought we saw you behind us."

"We've got a tricky mist here," Larkin called. "It's been leading us on a chase."

"We'd better stretch a towline," Runar said.

He untied the dinghy from *Bobber's* stern and tossed the line over to Cory, who walked the little boat like a dog to the stern and made the leash fast. Meanwhile, Runar heaved a heavy coil of line across for Larkin to fasten at the bow. Then, with *Kittiwake's* sails struck, *Bobber* pulled forward. The line stretched taut.

When Larkin wet her finger and held it up, the wind was too light to detect. And yet, when she tossed a wad of dreamweed over the rail, it floated off astern. Somehow, *Bobber* was catching enough wind to drag two other boats behind her.

Again they settled into silence. The damp had penetrated everywhere by now; *Kittiwake's* bare rigging was dripping. The air seemed almost too thick to breathe.

After a while, *Bobber* started veering off to starboard. Larkin followed suit. Yet *Bobber* kept slewing ever farther right, till Larkin had the tiller pushed over as far as it could go. "They're steering in circles," she said, but felt reluctant to send Cory forward to hail them, and break the silence.

The quiet had settled deeply around them when a low moan insinuated into the air. It seemed to come from below their feet, from *Kittiwake's* hull.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It tapered off into silence, leaving Larkin with a cold feeling on the spine.

"What was that?" Gimble said.

"Whale," Larkin answered, too promptly. "The hull can vibrate to their songs, if conditions are right."

The explanation seemed to satisfy them. Before long another call, higher pitched, came from below their feet. It rose, then sank; as it was trailing away into resonant silence, a third overlapped it in a slow, eerie canon.

Around them the fog was changing, pulling back in billowy sworls. Larkin stood watching, feeling oddly remote from her body. Her hand rested limp on the tiller.

And then they were there. Sails — hundreds of sails. Lugs and spankers, jibs and spinnakers, topgallants and moonrakers, all spread to the wind. They moved through the fogbank, a roiling cloud of white wings.

A shudder ran through *Kittiwake*, from bowsprit to stern, as if she were in the grip of a strong current. It brought Larkin suddenly to her senses. "After them!" she shouted. "Up sails! Undo the towline, Cory!"

Her crew, who had been gazing mesmerized at the mist, sprang to life. *Kittiwake's* mainsail shot up the mast, and her jib billowed free. They threw off the lines that bound her to *Bobber* and the dinghy. The wind caught her wings and sent her flying across the waves.

They quickly passed *Bobber*. The water was foaming by *Kittiwake's* hull. Larkin gave a yell of exhilaration. Ahead she could see the dark lines of a ship dodging porpoiselike through the mist. "How many masts?" she yelled to the foredeck. Gorran held up two fingers. "Too small," Larkin said.

With a shift of the wind, they found themselves in the thick of the herd. The mist was thinning; on every side they were hemmed in by sleek oak bodies and sails piled high as thunderclouds. The little dinghies sailed in their mothers' wakes, crowding close to each other but never touching.

Larkin knew her prey the instant she saw that long, low hull peek from the mist, dark and gleaming like mahogany. The ship had three masts, three white pyramids of sails. Larkin knew instantly that she would call her *Wellaway*. "Ready the grappling hooks," Larkin called. "Then hide yourselves!"

The hunters dived for their canvas wraps, leaving *Kittiwake's* deck as if empty. Larkin drew a sheet over herself last, crouching down by the tiller, only her hand visible. She peered out tensely through a gap, ignoring the tarry

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smell.

Kittiwake was slowly drawing close to their prey. At an unseen signal the herd changed course, synchronized like birds in flight. Larkin was slow to react, but it was just as well, for *Wellaway* had tacked athwart *Kittiwake's* path, making it easy to draw even closer. Larkin held motionless as the shadow of the big ship's rigging fell across the deck. *Wellaway* must have noticed them — no, not *them*, but *Kittiwake*, a lone youngster without any mother near.

With a distant jangle of rigging the big ship turned upwind, sails aback, as if to sniff *Kittiwake's* unfamiliar smell. Cautiously, so as not to startle her, Larkin nosed closer. Soon *Wellaway's* hull loomed over them, only yards away. They came even with the chains where her mainmast shrouds were anchored to her hull.

"Now!" Larkin shouted, throwing off her concealing canvas.

The crew erupted from their hiding places. Two had boathooks; they snagged the chains and heaved *Kittiwake* close. Grappling hooks flew up and over the ship's rails to cinch them tight together. Then, shrieking like pirates, the crew swarmed up *Wellaway's* side.

A tremor passed through the ship's hull. As Larkin climbed the side she felt it quiver like a horse's hide plagued with flies. Looking up, she saw the lines contract like muscles. The sails swung round, and *Wellaway* went tearing off northward.

At first all they could do was hang on for dear life. The ship was bucking and pitching across the waves in a desperate attempt to shake them off. Spray shot up as she thrashed from side to side. Lashed to her side, *Kittiwake's* timbers groaned as their hulls smashed together, then plunged apart.

Larkin could see her crew scattered across the deck, hanging panic-stricken to anything they could grasp. "Cut the braces!" she shouted. "We've got to disable her!" She seized the cutlass from her own sash and waved it high, so they would understand.

Hand over hand she dragged herself back along the gunwale to where the port-side main brace was fastened. Hanging onto the rail with one hand, she began to saw at the line with the cutlass.

The hemp fibers contracted, flinching. The rope end squirmed and slithered around the cleat, letting out the line. Grimly Larkin started to saw at a new spot. The deck lurched then, throwing her against the gunwale so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hard the air was knocked from her body.

When she caught her breath, she saw that big Gorran was attacking the starboard main brace across the broad deck from her. He had a hand axe. She saw him bring it down, half severing the cord. As the blow fell, the rope end lashed out at him. He raised an arm to fend it off, trying to swing the axe at it. It whipped his body with vicious force, then tangled in his legs, pulling him off balance. He fell and the rope wrapped around his body.

Crying out, Larkin started across the deck. The ship heeled over, the deck tilted, and she slipped back. She scrabbled forward again, pulling herself up the steep slope from handhold to handhold. On the deck ahead, Gorran was a writhing mass of cordage. She was almost there, yet might as well have been a league away.

Brill reached him first, and started hacking away at the rope. Larkin lunged forward and brought her cutlass down on the spot where the axe-blow had almost severed the line. The fibers snapped, and the rope end went suddenly limp. The detached brace whipped and writhed through the air, unable to gain any purchase. The sail to which it was fastened, suddenly loosed, flapped uselessly in the wind.

Larkin waved her crew on. "Get the other braces!" she cried, then turned to help untangle Gorran. He was bruised and nearly senseless; there was an ugly red welt around his neck where the rope had tried to squeeze the air out of him. Larkin fingered the line with revulsion; but it was dead now, like normal rope.

Shouts from the quarterdeck brought her attention back. Cory and Bedwa were trying to seize control of the tiller. As Larkin was drawing breath to shout a warning, the tiller lashed out to one side, striking Bedwa across the body and throwing her violently against the taffrail, where she crumpled in a heap. Larkin seized up the length of dead line and clambered aft. A piece of rope slithered under her feet, nearly tripping her; she hacked it with her cutlass and it drew back.

When she tossed the rope to Cory he recoiled, thinking it was live. "Tie a loop in the middle," she said. "We'll have to collar the tiller."

He saw instantly what she meant, and tied a slipknot in the rope, leaving a wide loop dangling. They each took an end then; Larkin passed hers around the starboard rail and stood ready to pull. Cory stood just outside the tiller's range, the loop dangling from his hand. The tiller stood still, as if to watch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him. He tossed the loop over it, and gave a sharp jerk to cinch it. Then he ran to the port rail to pass his end around.

"Now!" he shouted, and both of them pulled at once, stretching the rope tight and freezing the tiller's motion. It tugged frantically, but the rope held it.

"Take in your side; I'll let out!" Larkin called.

"Not too far!" Cory warned.

"Reposition your line; I want the tiller lashed to the side."

Cory saw the sense in this, and obeyed. Soon they had the tiller helplessly bound to one side. Now the ship was hobbled; she could only go in circles.

Even then *Wellaway* didn't give up; she fought for her freedom long after she should have known it was hopeless. They worked for an hour before they could strike all the sails and truly cripple the vessel. When it was over and her stately masts stood denuded, the lines dangling in limp dejection, the hunters all collapsed on the quarterdeck in exhaustion. Bedwa had broken several ribs and Gorran still had trouble swallowing; the rest of them sported an assortment of bruises and scrapes. But their spirits were soaring. They had caught themselves a ship.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" Larkin said, lying flat, gazing upward at the winter-forest tangle of rigging against the sky. She felt the deck's smooth teak planking against her back; it gave a little quiver of exhaustion.

"What do you suppose we'll get for her?" Brill said. They all stared at him, silent; no one wanted to think of giving her up yet.

"We'll have to tame her before we can sail her back," Larkin said.

"That will take a while," Cory said with satisfaction. "She's pretty feisty."

Larkin tried not to think what would happen then. Once in the world of men, *Wellaway* would cease to be the wild, living being she was now. She would lose her will, and then her control, and become a thing of wood and hemp, no more animate than *Kittiwake*.

They heard a call then: "Ahoy, *Kittiwake!*"

Larkin sat up. "*Bobber!* I was wondering where they'd gotten to."

Larkin and her crew lined *Wellaway's* rail, waving and calling out, as *Bobber* came up to the starboard side. It was obvious the other boat had not had the same luck. When Larkin's crew began calling out teasing comments

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she said, "Be quiet," for she saw the anger and accusations in the others' faces.

"We could have had one, too," one of *Bobber's* men called back. "We were almost upon her." He glanced darkly back at Runar, who stood at the helm. Runar didn't answer; he looked like he had barely heard. All his attention was on *Wellaway*.

They swarmed up the sides and soon half a dozen versions of the capture story were being told. Runar came aboard last. His deep-sunk eyes looked overcast as he scanned *Wellaway's* deck and rigging.

"Congratulations," he said to Larkin; his voice was dead.

She could only imagine he was jealous. She had succeeded and he hadn't. "Everyone did their part," she said, to dismiss her achievement.

"No!" Runar said; there was revulsion in his voice. "*I* had nothing to do with this." He looked over the disabled ship, his eye snagging on every severed line.

Larkin realized it wasn't jealousy. In an undertone she said, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"You almost had one...?"

"Yes. We were sneaking up on her just right: so cunning the uncles would have been proud. Then I looked up at her, and she was the freest, most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was enough to break your heart. So...I lost my nerve."

"Runar!" Larkin said, appalled. It was so unlike him. "We need the ships back in Fairny!"

"For what?" he said in a cutting voice. "So we can buy more trinkets than our neighbors?"

"So we can survive! The village is dying; the ships can give it life again. What else did we come out here for?"

"Not that," he said. "I don't know what for, but not that."

His eyes wandered to *Wellaway's* graceful lines again. Unthinkingly, he put out one hand to stroke the curved wood rail. Watching, Larkin felt her own skin shiver at the lightness of his touch.

"You can hunt again tomorrow," she said.

"And catch one to sell into a life of slavery?" he said bitterly.

"You can't think of that!" Larkin said fiercely. "It's something you can't control. Just the way the world is."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What a good excuse," he said.

She felt accused, assaulted. With cold control she said, "It's too bad the ships have to lose their freedom. *Someone* must, to save Fairny."

"Fairny's not worth it," he said.

He turned away restlessly. "I can't stand this. I'm going back to *Bobber*."

As he was swinging his leg over the rail he stopped in mid-motion, catching hold of one of the severed lines that dangled in mid-air. He looked at it as if it made a part of him bleed. "Gods, did you have to *maul* her?" he said.

Larkin didn't answer. Runar dropped down to *Bobber's* deck and cast off, pushing away hard with a long boathook, then raising the mainsail so as to drop far downwind of them.

"Where's he going?" someone said at Larkin's side.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Well, good riddance," she heard; but when she whirled around angrily to see who had spoken, no one would own up.

They were all tired, but she made them bring supplies over from *Kittiwake* and then put the boat on a towline. As they were working they spotted a bare mast through the thickening mist on *Wellaway's* port quarter. At first they tried to hail it, thinking it was *Bobber*, but then realized it was just the dinghy they had set adrift. Soon they had it tied at the ship's stem.

They fixed themselves a hearty meal and lounged on the open deck eating and passing around a pipe of shag. Larkin tried to join in the talk, but her merriment was forced. The voices seemed to jar the silent air. That night they all slept on the open deck, unwilling yet to trust the cabins where it would be easy to get trapped. For a while Larkin lay awake on the quarterdeck, and felt a tear tickling down the side of her face to drip on the planking underneath.

She woke in a gray and clammy dawn, thinking she had heard a buoy bell ringing. The fog was thick again, and *Wellaway's* spars and lines were crusted with white hoarfrost, making her skeleton look like carved ivory. Then the sound came again: a deep, melodious call ringing through the water. Lying on the deck, Larkin could feel it vibrating through her body, and her whole being seemed to feel its yearning.

It was like the note of a vast musical instrument, played on a slower scale of time. As if *Wellaway* were a huge fiddle, resonating. Listening, Larkin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought that if she could dive into such a note she could reach a level of tranquility deeper than light, deeper than wind, down where the motes hung suspended in twilight. Perhaps the slow song was a meditation word, a sound in which an eternal moment lives, sustained, suspended.

Someone was shaking her, calling her name. She was sinking deep, crushed by the weight of water. She flailed toward air, following the trail of bubbles her drowning breath had left on the way down. When she broke the surface, consciousness shot through her sleeping nerves with an intense tingle of pain.

Cory was leaning over her, shouting against the flow of shipsong. She wrenched herself to her feet. All around, her crew were lying mesmerized on the deck. The air rang. "Your fiddle, Cory!" she gasped. "Go get it!"

The first scrape of the bow on the strings snagged at the shipsong like a ripsaw on silk. Cory began to play a hornpipe, strident and out of tune.

"Stop that racket!" The crew were rousing angrily, wincing and holding their hands over their ears. The fiddle's voice gained strength as the slow bellsong faded before its dissonance.

Larkin gathered them all together. "We have to get to work," she said. "We won't be safe till we're back in our own waters. The first thing is to repair all the lines so we can sail her. Work fast, but be careful."

The splicing went fast with ten hands at work. They left the restored lines tied in safe coils on deck or looped from the spars till the time came to use them. When at last they were ready, Larkin gave the signal to let loose the main course. "One sail at a time," she said. "The instant she gets unruly, we strike it." Slowly *Wellaway* would learn to bend to their control.

As the big mainsail billowed out, they all stood alert for an attempt by the ship to break free; but her rigging hung limp and dead.

The day gave no hint as to the way home: the sun was obscured by mist. Larkin set the ship on a starboard reach, gambling that the wind had not shifted since yesterday. Then, it had been from the south; if she kept it on her right shoulder, she ought to be heading for land.

With only one sail up their progress was too slow, so presently Larkin ordered the main topsail set. Still *Wellaway* did not resist; it was as if the battle yesterday had broken her spirit. Even when they unbound the tiller she gave only a token struggle.

They were barely making headway. Larkin stood at the quarterdeck rail,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chafing and staring out into the mist. From time to time it seemed that, hidden in the shifting whiteness, she glimpsed a sail; but always it dissolved, only a wisp of visible moisture. Each time she felt an obscure pang of disappointment.

It was irrational. She had what she wanted, more than she had ever dared to dream. There was no reason to want to see the ships again.

The mist watched her silently, opaque in its secrets. She could almost see Runar's face in it. She had begun to wonder where he had gone, and to worry that he would not be able to find them again. From the ache her heart gave at the thought, she knew what she really feared: that he did not *want* to rejoin them, now or ever. That he had dissolved in her hands, escaped. Found another home.

Her fists clenched over the rail, wanting to catch and reel him in. What sort of net would hold a thing of mist?

But the crowding fog hemmed her in, blocked off her options. Like a lifetime's worth of habits, steering her against her will to a future she hadn't chosen, only acquiesced to. She longed to see sails.

"Ship ahoy!" someone called.

Larkin's attention snapped back. "Where away?"

"Starboard beam."

She squinted into the mist. Yes, there it was — but not a ship. It was *Bobber's* familiar outline. Larkin felt a surge of relief.

"Runar!" she called.

There was no answer. She could see him now, standing not at the helm but just forward of the mizzen mast, his hair blown back from his face. As she watched, *Bobber* came about. Her sails trimmed to the altered wind angle — and Runar had not laid a hand on them.

The realization throbbed through Larkin's body. *Bobber* was alive. No longer was she a poor wooden thing, a manmade artifact, obedient and domestic. Somehow, the mist had made her feral.

"Cory! Brill! Get the dinghy ready!" Larkin ordered.

Bobber was on a course that would take her past *Wellaway's* stern, between her and *Kittiwake*. "Runar, come about!" Larkin called from the stern. "You'll foul the towline!"

He glanced up at her and grinned, a wild-mischievous expression like a beast or a god. She realized then that he was not her ally: he was *Bobber's*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They were only yards from the towline when the boat came neatly about, her sails giving a chuckling sound as they luffed in the wind. Runar seized hold of the towline, and his cutlass flashed.

"Runar, stop!" Larkin screamed. He was setting *Kittiwake* free.

He paid her no heed. She raced over to where Cory and Brill had hauled the dinghy up. "Come with me," she said. "We've got to catch *Kittiwake* before..." She didn't finish the thought.

They clambered overside. Cory took the helm while Larkin jerked the little sail up. When they rounded *Wellaway's* side they saw *Bobber* standing alongside *Kittiwake*. Runar was aboard the sloop, raising the sails.

"Rot you, you blistered traitor!" Larkin shouted.

Runar jumped back over to Bobber. Instantly her lines tensed and she swooped away from *Kittiwake's* side. They could hear Runar laughing.

Kittiwake stood still on the waves, her sails flapping. Was it merely the wind, or was she undecided, confused by her new freedom? Larkin leaned forward as if she could speed the dinghy. She saw *Kittiwake's* main sheet tighten tentatively, and the tiller move.

"Kittiwake!" she screamed.

Of all the things in life, *Kittiwake* was the closest to a part of her. She knew every board, every fitting. To lose her boat would be to lose the thing in herself that yearned for freedom.

The sloop hesitated, as if sniffing the wind. A gust blew past, tearing the mist around them like gauze.

"Faster, faster!" Larkin said to the dinghy.

The sun broke through, the walls of mist drew back. They were surrounded again by billowy sails, spread in a swift-moving cluster, piled high before the wind. A cry trumpeted through the air.

Kittiwake jerked round in elation, tossing her bowsprit. She looked as if she had scented freedom.

The thought that she might escape pierced Larkin like honed loneliness.

"Kittiwake, don't leave me!" she cried out.

The boat hesitated, quivering, but trapped by the agony in Larkin's voice. The pause was enough for the dinghy to reach her. But as Larkin readied to jump aboard, *Kittiwake* shied away.

"Let me come aboard," Larkin said, leaning across the water. "Please. I love you, *Kittiwake.* Think of all the good times we've had together. We've

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

never let each other down, no matter what."

Carefully Cory steered the dinghy close to the boat's flank. This time she didn't flinch. Larkin leaped across. She wrapped her arms around the mainmast in a painful rush of gratitude, pressing her face to the warm wood. "Never leave me," she whispered. "I need you."

The boat rocked as Brill leaped aboard. He reached out to take hold of the tiller, but Larkin said fiercely, "Don't touch it! Don't touch anything."

"But — "

"She won't betray us."

There were shouts of alarm across the water. Cory shouted, "Look!" and they turned.

Ahead, two enormous ships had materialized out of the flock, one on each of *Wellaway's* flanks. They were matching her speed, too close for safety. If any one of them altered course there would be a collision.

And then the ships *did* alter course — all three at once, synchronized like a school of fish. A fresh wind blew past, skittering across the waves. *Wellaway's* topsails billowed down, loosed from her spars by knots gone slack. Larkin could see small figures rushing around in a panic on her deck. The ship had come alive again.

"After them!" Larkin shouted to Cory. Under her feet the hull shifted; the mainsail snapped in the wind, then caught. *Kittiwake* had obeyed her command.

"Good girl," she whispered, one hand stroking the mast.

SAVE UP TO $26.90

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Send us only $36.00 for a full two years of F&SF, saving you $26.90 off the newsstand price. Or, if you prefer, send $19.97 for one year, a savings of $11.48.

The coupon on the reverse brings you a monthly package of F&SF's exciting fiction, along with its essential columns by Bruce Sterling, Gregory Benford, John Kessel, and Kathi Maio.

The coupon on the reverse side is backed by this copy, and removal does not affect the text of the story. F&SF publishes 11 issues a year, including a big (240 page), combined October/November anniversary issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The three ships were heading northwest now, out to sea. The humans aboard could not alter *Wellaway's* course without ramming one of her escorts. Despite herself, Larkin smiled at the strategy. It was intimidating, clever teamwork. The ships had learned.

Kittiwake's little sails were straining their hardest, but she was falling behind. Ahead, *Wellaway's* sleek flanks strained through the water; her bow-wave peeled back in foam. Her sails reached for the sky. The sight was unbearably beautiful.

Larkin knew then: it was not the ship she wanted. Not the dead wood and flaccid canvas. It was *that*, the free thing that danced with the wind. The thing that died if she grasped it.

"Go free, *Wellaway*," Larkin whispered. The wind blew tears from the edges of her eyes.

Small black figures were jumping off the ship's stern like fleas from a dog. Larkin gestured to Cory to make sure he saw the heads bobbing in the water. He waved acknowledgment.

"Those cowards!" Brill growled. "Abandoning ship."

"It's all right," Larkin answered. Her voice was strangely calm.

Wellaway was escaping, swift as a dream half-captured. She would never haul cargo now, or lie stabled in harbor, or labor in human harness. Larkin looked down to *Kittiwake*, feeling a pang. "I ought to free you, too," she said softly.

The hull shivered; the mast seemed to nuzzle her ear. Brill said, "It was

Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796 543R5

❑ Yes, send me one year of F&SF for only &19.97, saving $11.48 off the newsstand price.
❑ Send me two years for $36.00, Saving $26.90 off the newsstand price.
❑ Check here if you would like to extend or renew your current sub.

Name_____
Address_____
City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Outside the U.S. please add $5.00 per year for postage. Please make all checks payable in U.S. dollars. Allow six weeks for delivery of first copy. F&SF publishes 11 issues a year, including a big (240 page), combined October/November anniversary issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her own choice."

"I know," Larkin said. "I just feel selfish. She could have been free."

"Lucky for us that she loves you," Brill said.

She loves me, Larkin thought. And I love her. Is that bondage?"

By the time they had picked up all the swimmers, the sea around them was empty of sails.

THEY TIED up at the tumbledown Fairny dock in silence. No one came out to greet them; it looked as if their failure were complete. They had set out in two boats, and come back in one. There would be a lot of head-shaking and second-guessing to live through.

Larkin let the others go ashore, then lingered to clean and straighten up things that didn't need straightening.

Jumber was standing on the dock when she looked up. "What happened?" he said.

"We lost *Bobber*," Larkin said. "Runar took her."

"He *took* her?" Jumber said, stunned.

"She took him. I can't explain, Jumber; you wouldn't believe it. But she's happy. She's free. They both are."

Jumber looked like a drowning man. He turned and walked away down the dock. Dropping the rope in her hand, Larkin followed him. He was standing looking at the dying village.

"I'm ruined," he said.

The sight of him made her go soft inside, as she had guessed it would. Not once had she feared he would get angry or blame her. It wasn't in him. She put a hand on his limp shoulder and suddenly knew she loved him very much.

"You're not ruined," Larkin said. "I'm going to give you *Kittiwake*."

Jumber gave a humorless laugh. "She's not a cargo boat."

"She's better than nothing."

"I couldn't take her away from you."

"You won't. I'm coming with her."

It took him several seconds to react. He turned to look as if doubtful he'd heard right. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him tight, her head on his shoulder. He was solid, comforting, and smelled of wool.

"You're coming? You mean it?" Jumber said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I mean it," Larkin repeated.

He didn't try to kiss her, or say any more. He just held her as if afraid to let go.

For an instant her thoughts strayed, and she wondered where *Bobber* was at that moment, out on the wild sea. She brought her mind back to harbor.

"You're sure?" Jumber asked again.

"I'm sure," she said.

If it was bondage, it was one she could bear.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

If you are planning a change of address please notify us as far in advance as possible, and allow six weeks for the change to become effective.

Be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes. Print clearly and, if possible, attach an old mailing label.

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____
(please print)

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,

Mercury Press, 143 Cream Hill Rd, West Cornwall, CT 06796

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction
MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. Catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

PULPS, HARDBOUNDS, PAPERBACKS, 50 page catalog for $2, buy, sell, trade. Graham Holroyd, 19 Borrowdale Dr., Rochester, NY 14626. 716-225-4879.

200,000 SF and Mystery paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines in stock. Free catalogs. PANDORA'S BOOKS, Box F-54, Neche, ND 58265.

BARRY R. LEVIN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY LITERATURE. Rare and first editions. Catalogs issued. 726 Santa Monica Blvd., #201, Santa Monica, CA 90401.

SEND 50¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & Pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

SF/HORROR/MYSTERY paperbacks. New & Used. Free catalog! T.D. Bell, 526 Leahy Lane, Ballston Spa, NY 12020.

SF, FANTASY & HORROR bought & Sold. Collections purchased. List $1.00. Ron Czerwien, 1805 Lynndale Rd., Madison, WI 53711.

FREE CATALOGS of Science Fiction/Fantasy pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections purchased (large or small). Ray Bowman, Box 167F, Carmel, IN 46032.

MAGIC REALISM MAGAZINE: "Fascinating"—Roger Zelazny. $14.95/year. Box 620-FS, Orem, UT 84059.

SF BOOKS AND VIDEOS. Large selection. Discount Prices. Free catalogue. (800) 34-SCIFI.

HIPPOCRENE BOOKS, INC. offers quality paperback reprints of International Fantasy, Decadence, Adventure and Horror classics. Works and anthologies from over 13 countries around the world, editors like Brian Stableford, writers like G. Meyrink, J.K. Huysmans, G. Farrington, S. Grabinski, R.W. Chambers. Free catalog: Hippocrene Books, 171 Madison, New York, NY 10016.

TAPES/CASSETTES

BOOKS ON AUDIO TAPE. Star Trek, Star Wars, Asimov to Zelazny. Free catalog. Atco Books, Box 690791, Houston, TX 77269-0791.

OLD TIME RADIO PROGRAMS on quality tapes. Great classic science fiction! Also comedy, mysteries, westerns, music. Free catalogue. Carl Y. Froelich, 2 Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennslyvania 17349.

MISCELLANEOUS

STARBORN ALUMNI and VETERANS! Authentic shirts from YOUR school (Mars Tech, Galactic Naval Academy, more) and YOUR old outfit (Draco Marines, Galactic Occupation Forces/Earth, more). Free Catalog. INTERSTELLAR, Department O, Box 161, Naperville, IL 60566.

MANUSCRIPTS wanted, all types. Publisher with 70-year tradition. 1-800-695-9599.

TREKKER'S FUNZINE: Hours of Trekker puzzles, games, trivia. Fun! Sample $2.00. MJM Publications, POB 5058, Harrisburg, PA 17110-5058.

PAPER FANTASIES MAGAZINE. Where imaginations meet. Find friends. Share dreams. LSASE: PF32, Box 269, Loughman, FL 33858-0269.

TIME TRAVEL–Psychic Helmet–Levitation–Aliens–Psychic Combat. Huge catalog $3.25. IGOS, 255 N. El Cielo #E565E, Palm Springs, CA 92262.

Reach 180,000 responsive readers at these low, low rates: $15.00 minimum for 10 words, plus $1.50 for each additional word. Frequency discount: 10% for six consecutive insertions, 15% for twelve. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, 143 Creamhill Road, West Cornwall, CT 06796.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

COMING ATTRACTIONS

JUST IN time for the spring rains, we bring you some excellent reading in our April issue.

F&SF favorite **R. Garcia y Robertson** returns with our cover story, "Wendy Darling, RFC." The story is an amazing fantasy homage, set in London during World War I. A very familiar young woman named Wendy, now all grown up, looks out the window of her old nursery and sees — not pixies — but bombers heading for the center of town, where her infant's class meets. As she runs through the streets to save children we would call kindergarteners, she wishes for just a bit of her childish magic...

We go from the magic of fairies to the magic of technology. **David Brin** shows us a not-too-distant future in which husband and wife come home and exercise in their separate virtual reality machines. The programs are so lifelike that they affect the everyday — from food choices to interpersonal relationships. The difference between reality and the imagination is central to "NatuLife™."

Finally, popular new writer **Marina Fitch** returns to our pages with a science fiction mystery. "Sarah at the Tidepool" is about a woman who is hired by a company to make a suit that fits over human skin like a glove. Ostensibly developed as protection against a hostile sun, the suit becomes a tool in a game between an unscrupulous corporate executive and a jealous lover.

After April showers comes ... baseball! **Esther M. Friesner's** Little League story provides an upcoming cover, as does a horror story by **Ian MacLeod**. Some old favorites will return to our pages this summer as well. **Ben Bova** looks at Einstein's inspirations, and **George Alec Effinger** sends our favorite barbarian warrior, Maureen Birnbaum, against Cthulu. **Richard Bowes** returns with more adventures of Kevin Grierson, and **Dale Bailey** shows us life inside a fish tank. So now is the time to subscribe. We have a convenient form on page 157.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This publication is included in a reference system from Information Access Company in one or more of the following formats:

CD-ROM, microfilm, online

Name

Company

Address

City

State/Country

Zip

Phone

Name of publication

For information regarding availablity of this publication in Information Access Company products, call toll free 800/227-8431 (U.S. only) or 415/378-5000 or send this form to:

Information Access Company
Rights & Permissions Dept.
362 Lakeside Drive
Foster City, CA 94404

Information Access
COMPANY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bargain Back Issue Sale

We're buried under a 10-year accumulation of F&SF back issues, which we must clear out. These issues go back to the mid and late 1980s. For a limited time we're offering them at the bargain price of six different issues for only $10.00 or twelve for $18.00 (plus $1.50 postage and handling). Send order to:

Mercury Press, 143 Cream Hill, West Cornwall, CT 06796

❑ Yes, send me 6 different back issues of F&SF. I enclose $10.00.
❑ Send me 12 issues for $18.00 (Add $1.50 postage & handling.)

Name_____

Address_____

City/St/Zip_____

We cannot fill orders for specific issues. Offer available only in the U. S. Allow 4 weeks for delivery.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED